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**FORMERLY KNOWN AS MYSELF**

A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Faculty of the Department of English and Philosophy  
Murray State University  
Murray, KY

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by Rachel Lundberg  
August 2019

For Elizabeth—  
thank you for our story.

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## INTRODUCTION

A story that centers on a character's personal identity or sense of self is necessarily about the discovery, transformation, or challenge of that identity. A character who is comfortable and confident in who he or she is and remains that way throughout the story faces no conflict of identity, and offers no opportunity to explore the subject. If, however, a character is unsure, is still figuring things out, is beset by institutions or people who oppose the core tenets of his or her selfhood, the story opens to a multitude of questions: What is identity? How is it constructed? How much of a person's self is decided by that person and how much by the society he or she lives in? What aspects of identity can be altered, and why would someone wish to do so? These questions will likely not be answered or even directly addressed by the text, but their presence creates useful inroads to the story for both writer and reader. The four short stories in this thesis, "Formerly Known as Myself," use these questions as a point of contact for varying discussions of identity.

Even if I don't set out to pose these questions in a given story, they usually find their way into my work. My family culture is one of labeling: my father's instruction, "Don't wear green on St. Patrick's Day. Our ancestors were Scots-Irish—Orangemen," or fridge magnets that proclaim, "You bet your dupa I'm Slovak." Growing up, I was surrounded by self-described libertarians, ex-Catholics, militant agnostics, contrarians. In other words, people who understood identity as rebellion, as distinguishing oneself from the dominant culture. Even my mother, the most conventional of all of us, refused to call

her Christianity a religion and refused to lump herself with the Baptists whose church she attended.

Amid all this anti-establishment sentiment, one might think a gender nonconforming child would thrive, but gender and sexuality proved to be the only areas of divergence my family wouldn't tolerate. My parents constantly pressured me to wear makeup and more feminine clothes. Even the athletic girls on my tennis team used "dyke" as the ultimate insult. When I wanted to identify myself, I had to think a lot about labels, about whether there was any inherent meaning in identity markers. To call myself "gay," or "lesbian," or even "dyke," I had to process the negative connotations my family and peers had instilled in the words. When I finally used these labels for myself, they seemed to have no influence on those around me: my family insisted that I couldn't be a lesbian, that I was simply afraid of men and had made myself unattractive to them. Longer hair, they suggested, a dress, even breast augmentation might help. Some aspects of identity, they stressed, are not mutable: a person can be ex-Catholic, but not ex-straight; one might resist conventional politics, but not sexuality. With my own concept of self in direct conflict with the understanding of identity that was modeled for me, I had to dismantle my assumptions about the personal and public labels people use, and construct my own meaning.

My experiences gave me an approach to writing characters that is closely tied to the examination of identity. The characters I tend to write about frequently question who they are, both to themselves and others. They challenge which characteristics are innate and which are constructed. Many are acutely concerned with the way others see them, and with the friction between their inner and outer identities. The characters who are not

directly anxious about their own selfhood provide a counterpoint, and an opportunity for their core values to be tested. At the very least, I am considering—and at times gesturing toward this through narration and other characters’ words—the questions my characters may avoid: how would they define themselves, and how do these images match up with others’ perceptions, with reality, with how I am attempting to portray the characters? These questions of *how* identity functions arise frequently in works where a character’s selfhood is challenged. For instance, the title character in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando: A Biography* is relatively quick to accept her transformation into a woman, but the novel spends a good deal of time considering the change’s implications. The young protagonists of Sandra Cisneros’ collection *Woman Hollering Creek* examine their emerging selfhood as adolescents do, with comparisons to their peers and to pop culture.

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Emma Donoghue’s novel *Frog Music* demonstrates how the struggle for self-definition can be hindered or intensified by one’s society. Donoghue, best known for her novel *Room*, writes primarily historical fiction and draws her characters from historical records (Donoghue, “Biography”). *Frog Music* dramatizes the murder of Jenny Bonnet, a woman who faced repeated arrest for wearing male clothes, at San Francisco’s San Miguel Station in 1876. Jenny isn’t the point-of-view character of *Frog Music*, so the reader doesn’t get much direct information from her about why she sees her style of dress as worth the continued arrests and harassment, but Donoghue allows implicit questions to permeate the novel: Is Jenny Bonnet an early butch or transgender figure, insofar as the attitudes of the time allowed for those concepts? If she is simply a woman who prefers comfortable clothes in which to ride her stolen bicycle, does that change the meaning of

the text? What kind of negotiations of identity is Jenny working through behind the scenes, while her friend Blanche, the protagonist, is marginalized for a very different expression of gender/sexuality as a feminine burlesque performer and sex worker? As Donoghue describes her work, “when you’re writing about those who’ve been left out of capital-H History, you feel a burning obligation to put the facts on the record as well as spinning a memorable story” (“Mad About the Butch”). By this, Donoghue seems to refer not just to the arrest reports and inquest records that detail Jenny’s hardships, but to conveying the experience of being a woman like Jenny in a cultural landscape that was hostile toward her unconventional identity. Further, to the difficulty of forming that identity at all, at a time when the language modern readers might use to describe Jenny did not exist. Instead, Jenny refers to her situation through abstraction and metaphor, as when she defends the nobility of frogs: “Without a touch of slipperiness, you can’t have it both ways . . . Live on land and in water as well. I call that crafty” (Donoghue, *Frog Music* 18). Jenny’s struggle to “have it both ways,” to live somewhere between the realms of masculine and feminine, is the core of her character: not just her identity, but the construction and defense of it.

In my historical story “On Bleecker Street,” Lucinda and Aggie negotiate some of the same questions that Jenny Bonnet must tackle. Aggie has taken on her brother Edmond’s name and used his qualifications to launch her career in a sphere largely closed to women, but now spends a majority of her time as Edmond. With all of her personal and professional contacts formed through this assumed identity, “Aggie” can only exist in her own mind, or when she is alone. The question of what constitutes a person’s identity is especially pointed for Aggie: Is she the girl who grew up beside her brother, or is she



the man who became a respected academic? Are both just valences of the same person? As Lucinda puts it, “what are you called when you wear a dress?” Today, Aggie might identify as genderfluid or nonbinary, but in the 1903 setting of “On Bleeker Street,” these terms weren’t available to her. Both she and Lucinda must navigate the intricacies of defining themselves in a society whose mindset is too limited to encompass their experiences. They exist fluidly on a spectrum of gender and sexuality that Americans in the early twentieth century would have had difficulty describing, let alone labeling or internalizing. Lucinda’s gender trouble appears more straightforward at first: Robert is only a costume she wears, a disguise she uses to infiltrate a male-dominated space. As she grows closer to Edmond, she realizes that the division between personas is not so clear-cut for either of them. When she first meets Edmond and learns his other name, she insists, “Edmond suits you better,” and only uses the name Aggie as an insult, to criticize his hypocrisy in using her as a cover. She changes her mind after spending time alone with Aggie, and eventually understands Robert as more than a fake name. Though she cannot definitively answer her questions of identity, Lucinda finds comfort in the possibilities of both personas.

“On Bleeker Street” serves as the center for the collection’s discussion of identity because it deals most overtly with how the characters conceptualize and construct their identities. While similar themes unite all four stories, “On Bleeker Street” is the one whose action is most focused on this tension. The significance of Bleeker Street in the story, and more broadly of Lucinda’s home in New York City’s Bowery neighborhood, is drawn from the area’s historical reputation as a site of bohemian and gay culture (Chauncey 33). Infamous for its flophouses and dives, the Bowery provided

the opportunity for escape from the traditional social mores that governed the more affluent Upper Manhattan area where Edmond lives and teaches at Columbia University. For Lucinda and Aggie, the realm of seedy bars and dance halls offers freedom and anonymity, a place where they won't draw scrutiny regardless of which outfits and names they've taken for the evening. Though her Bowery apartment is a marker of her economic status, Lucinda appreciates the district's possibilities as a place "where night embraced all the secret lives hidden in candle-lit tenements," and the pressure to delineate and label her identity could be temporarily forgotten.

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In fiction, a case of mistaken identity can be a compelling story because there is an inherent twist or upset: either the reader or the characters, or both, are proved wrong. The trope appears across genres, from pulp and crime novels to Shakespeare's plays. For example, *Twelfth Night* takes advantage of all the complex situations that arise when a young woman disguises herself as a man. In *Twelfth Night*, mistaken identity is used primarily for comedic value and for creating complications within the central love triangle, but the trope doesn't have to be used literally. In literary fiction, the trope has a compelling counterpart: mistaken *inner* identity, in which the person's name might never have been in question, but the assumptions made about the character prove false. The character may even have been wrong about herself, and now must wade through a process of re-identification, of assigning a new self to the name.

Emma Donoghue's short story "Daddy's Girl" provides a useful example of both "inner" and "outer" mistaken identity. Part of a collection of stories that all derive from historical records, "Daddy's Girl" centers on the aftermath of the 1901 death of Murray

Hall, a Tammany Hall politician who was posthumously revealed to have been assigned female at birth, in today's terminology. He married twice, adopted a daughter, and even voted before women had the right to do so (*New York Times*). At the turn of the century, the revelation of his birth-assigned sex forced a revision of his entire life, by colleagues and friends who could not reconcile Hall's anatomy with his public identity. A bookseller of Hall's acquaintance, C. S. Pratt, told the *New York Times*, "During the seven years I knew him I never suspected that he was anything else than what he appeared to be. While he was somewhat effeminate in appearance and talked in a falsetto voice, still his conduct and actions were distinctively masculine." For contemporary newspapers, the case was cut and dried, with headlines such as "Woman Lives as Man" (*Chicago Tribune*) and "Death Revealed Her Sex" (*New York Tribune*). Pratt's quote, however, reveals that the revelation was not so easy to process for those who knew Murray Hall. Donoghue's story dramatizes this challenge for Hall's daughter Minnie, who reportedly said at the inquest that she would never refer to her father as a woman. Hall's wives, both dead before Murray, apparently kept the secret from Minnie.

Readers might ask whether Hall lived under such extreme conditions—even hiding his deadly breast cancer until the very last moment—because he felt his male identity was the true version of himself, or because it gave him opportunities that would have otherwise been unavailable. "Daddy's Girl" is more concerned with the renegotiation of Minnie's memories, but Minnie does take time to ask the question: "I wonder now if it was an adventure, at first, or an escape? Was he hiding from somebody, the first time he put on a cap and a pair of trousers, or did he just like the feel of them? Could he have guessed it would be for always?" (Donoghue, *Astray* 236) In this way,

“Daddy’s Girl” approaches the topic of identity from several different vantage points: the strangers who draw conclusions about Murray Hall based on what they consider to be the facts; the daughter who must re-contextualize what she knows about her father with his secret; and for Hall, the implied struggle of constructing an identity that suited him, that defied society’s restrictions. The story’s combination of mistaken identity, of both the character’s surface-level persona and his most inner self, highlights the ways in which identity, its formation, and its expression are intertwined.

“Daddy’s Girl” relates in obvious ways to the conflict surrounding Aggie’s gender identity, but it also resonates with some of the other stories in this collection. In “Raise, Call,” the elderly widow Catharine must reevaluate herself after the death of her husband and estrangement of her children. For most of her life, Catharine defined herself in terms of her familial relationships; her public identity was centered around being a wife and mother. She was never fully satisfied in these roles, and now that she is largely disconnected from them, Catharine can acknowledge to herself that she had never aspired to domestic life. After those all-consuming jobs are over, what is she allowed? What is she worth? The process is not so simple, to her mind, as choosing what to pursue: she feels, at her age, that the woman she was before her marriage is too far in the past, and never had a chance to develop. The only aspects of her adult life Catharine had to herself were “those obsessions and strange hobbies her family came to think of as bids for attention,” chief among them gambling. Miranda, the only one of her children Catharine is still in contact with, worries that her mother will return to her gambling addiction, but poker is one of the few activities Catharine still enjoys. The times she spent at the casino in secret are her most vivid memories of when her family was away, like the casino

facade's plaster pharaoh, "the garish-gold, weather-worn face Catharine had wished on so many times, had come to mark her days by." As she attempts to renegotiate the place gambling has in her life, Catharine ends up reevaluating her role as mother and her relationship with Miranda. Her identity was not "mistaken" in the traditional sense, but hidden from her family until she had the independence to reconstruct it.

Both of the main characters in "Los Alamos from Above" have their own struggles with mistaken identity. The newly divorced Andrew is unsure how to interpret the conventional life he left behind, one he says he created from cultural cues, imitated from TV and magazines. Andrew's main problem is that he is unsure how to reconcile the conflicting aspects of himself: his relationship with his wife and his affair with Ian, his sexual desires and his emotional needs. He views these parts of his identity as separate and incompatible, as though he can only express one half of himself at a time. As a result, he attempts to keep Ian in the dark about his personal life during their affair, and has difficulty reconnecting and communicating with him during their trip. Ian sometimes wonders which version of Andrew he's dealing with, but understands that they are ultimately the same man. For his part, Ian structures his identity around specific roles and what he thinks they require him to be: he describes himself as "homewrecker," "sinking ship," and "sucker," and performs the bitterness and self-pity he associates with those roles. His self-analysis is often inaccurate or untruthful, as when he calls himself the type to give in by habit, even though he has been contradicting and resisting Andrew for the entire trip. In this way, though Ian is introspective and honest, he is something of an unreliable narrator because his self-descriptions are filled with blind spots. The labels he uses, however incorrect, still have power over him—it was romance, his status as ex-

lover, that convinced Ian to make the trip with Andrew, even though he doesn't want to rekindle the relationship. Eventually, he has to let go of the "bitter ex" label in order to stop playing that role. Ian is his own biggest obstacle, the one mistaking his identity for his handful of adopted signifiers.

Of these four stories, "Tire Fire of the Valkyries" deals least overtly with identity issues, but this is partly a factor of the narrator's unwillingness to deal with them. Clayton, angry and dissatisfied with his lack of fulfillment and control over his life, tries to eschew identity altogether. He chooses to abandon his passion for music, even though it still governs his way of thinking, and lets destruction become his form of self-expression, a kind of petty and masochistic response to a life that didn't work out as he'd hoped: "With every swing [of the sledgehammer], Clayton shatters possibility, demolishes old selves." Even in his odd friendship with Dax and Kiev, he keeps the other men at a distance and refuses to share anything personal about himself. Dax, by contrast, is almost aggressively open with the details of his tumultuous personal life, forcing Clayton into an uncomfortable emotional intimacy with him. When Dax makes an attempt at physical intimacy, Clayton reacts violently, but tries to downplay the incident to himself. If he were to acknowledge any kind of interest in or attraction to Dax, that would force a reevaluation of himself, a direct confrontation with identity. Even when he sleeps with the woman whose business he just demolished, Clayton refuses to examine his motivations, doing his best to become the blank slate he projects for others. Ultimately, Clayton finds it easier to damage his personal relationships beyond repair than to confront their implications or allow himself to be vulnerable. Clayton believes Dax's problem is that he "lets the poison in him be seen, when it should be masked," and

Clayton is desperate to avoid the same mistake. His struggle with selfhood is a result of his perceived status as an outsider, with no healthy connections with which to align his identity.

Blanche, the protagonist of *Frog Music*, can be read the same way—she is uncomfortable being recognized as a woman “on the town,” but she makes no attempt to hide it by wearing more modest clothes. She accepts facts about herself without considering them too deeply, choosing to look away from or attempt to erase certain aspects of her identity she would prefer not to confront: “She never exactly intended to be a soiled dove (that curious euphemism), but neither can she remember putting up any real objection. She stepped into the life like a swimmer entering a lake, a few inches at a time” (Donoghue, *Frog Music* 19). Many aspects of the plot—her husband’s affair with their roommate, his unwillingness to contribute financially, and the abusive home into which Blanche has put her baby—are the result of problems Blanche has tried to ignore. When Jenny’s murder and the baby’s abduction force Blanche to acknowledge the realities of her motherhood and marriage, only then does she begin examining her priorities and purposefully making decisions that define her.

“Tire Fire of the Valkyries” is the first story of “Formerly Known as Myself” because it is less overtly introspective than the others. Clayton does not consciously confront his identity issues like the protagonists of the other three stories. “On Bleeker Street” is second because it serves to contextualize the discussion of identity that continues in the two stories following it. The third story, “Los Alamos from Above,” examines the end of a relationship and the characters grappling with their selfhood in its fallout, in contrast with the relationship just beginning in “On Bleeker Street.” Finally,

“Raise, Call” takes place near the end of Catharine’s life, and deals with challenging the identity she had accepted for decades.

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One of the basic parts of a story I have the most difficulty with is plot, probably because I begin a story with lots of ideas about a character’s personality and inner world, but few ideas about what events will drive the transformation I want to show. For example, when I started writing “Tire Fire of the Valkyries,” I already had most of the concepts of Clayton’s misplaced anger and identity avoidance issues, but the first version of the story failed to access those ideas in-depth. My struggle to dramatize characters’ inner conflicts with engaging, cohesive narratives is often made trickier by characters who are secretive, untrustworthy, or unsure of themselves. In working on these stories, I didn’t always find perfect plot foundations on which to build, but I learned how to ask useful questions that might lead me to the plot. In these stories that focus on identity, many of the questions are related: How do the characters’ challenges with identity shape their wants and ambitions? How do they pursue these wants, and what mistakes do their inner conflicts drive them to make? How do their identity issues affect their relationships? These questions don’t create a clear path through the stories on their own, but answering them almost always pushes the stories in a fruitful direction. Lucinda has a clear desire to be a literary scholar, but her status as a working-class woman hinders that ambition, so she seeks to reshape herself. Catharine and Clayton both fall into self-destructive mistakes; Catharine because she needs to acknowledge who she is, and Clayton because he doesn’t want to acknowledge it. These underlying concepts don’t



necessarily need to be spelled out in the story, but having them in mind helps me keep the plot moving toward the ending I want.

As I add more stories to these four and put together a book-length collection, identity and the examination of it will remain the unifying focus. Not all will have the emphasis these do on sexuality and gender expression. The handful of stories I have in progress that are not included in this thesis explore religion and race, as well as class, age, and education. My hope is that the intersections of these identity categories will appear seamless, that Catharine's return to the poker table matches well with the story of an ex-Baptist lesbian who lusts after a female preacher. Because writing fiction means inhabiting the mind of "the other," many of the anxieties of identity, the neurotic conceptions of selfhood in these stories, are not mine—but some are. As Emma Donoghue writes, "Although the range of nobodies, oddballs and freaks I write about has broadened—my curiosity is as much about race and class as sex and sexuality—the woman in pants often wanders in" ("Mad About the Butch").

I plan to continue writing about characters who are unsure, who either overthink or don't think enough, who are vulnerable in some way to society's harsh policing of identity. I plan to return to the stories in this thesis as my writing abilities improve, to make these characters' identities and their conflicts more fully realized, in the hopes that readers might recognize something of themselves. In fleshing out these questions of selfhood in a fictional space, I learn to call myself "human." I learn to call myself "dyke." I learn to call myself "writer."

## TIRE FIRE OF THE VALKYRIES

When his sledgehammer sings through the air, Clayton hears music, a whole goddamn orchestra. His buddy Kiev said once that smashing has its own kind of music, at least a rhythm, but Clayton's ears never settle on crumbling brick or chiming glass. Tonight, destruction is pure Wagner. Every time the sledge makes its first, splitting contact with a tombstone, one plain rock on a half-acre display lot, Clayton's head rings with Brünnhilde piercing the high C in "hojotoho!"

The three of them don't often talk while they work, preferring to keep their breaths aligned with their swings, but Clayton's nerves are so bunched up that his sweat feels electric. "The usual?" he asks Dax.

After a few nights demolishing with them, Dax told the others what he pretended to smash. "My dad's cock," he said. Sometimes he'd add a "squish" or a scream of agony when he drove his customary 9 iron golf club through a pane of moonlit glass.

For the headstone company job, Dax wields a hammer like the others, arcing it like a bat and taking the head off a praying angel. He shields his eyes from an invisible sun and follows the head's flight back to earth. Between empty mausoleums, his laugh pinballs off stone and comes back distorted. "Nope. Tonight I'm just busting tombstones."

"I hope you're enjoying it." The city's urban sprawl and failing auto industry left plenty of condemned factories on its outskirts, abandoned metalscapes where Clayton's crew make their music unaccompanied. But Dorsett Monuments isn't derelict.

Somewhere in the background of the aria, a cash register rings up damages, and a police siren wails even higher than the valkyrie.

When Dax proposed the target and said Dorsett had it coming, Clayton didn't ask for details. He'd seen Dax get hurled through a storefront window one night, then drink with his assailant the next. If Dax were nursing a grudge, it must be justified. Clayton splits a grave marker down the center and hopes that the demo job on Dorsett's outdoor displays will be the extent of Dax's revenge. He knows the three of them are all helpless in a way they'd never articulate, all striking out at objects because dissatisfaction and bitterness aren't smashable, and worse, neither is the gnawing suspicion that their problems are their own fault, but Dax lets his anger run too hot. Lets the poison in him be seen, when it should be masked.

He wants to tell Dax that it's not healthy to live on the same dead-end street where he grew up, in a shotgun house right across from his father's, but Clayton and Kiev agreed not to get involved in Dax's intertwined strings of discarded jobs and abusive boyfriends. The three have very little history, and Clayton prefers to maintain the distance. If they go out to drink together, to shoot pool and hold beer bottles like fragile things between their cracked palms, Clayton talks only of the poker game on TV or how the beer he used to drink went to shit after the company changed hands. When Dax unveils the story of his latest breakup, rages over a recent confrontation with his boss, the balance among the group seems a fragile thing, too. Clayton never acknowledges the tension.

"Having fun, Kiev?"

His rhythm broken, Kiev leans his hammer against a marble cross and wipes dust on his t-shirt. A half-lidded stare is his typical answer, and it's the only comment he ever made on the nickname, a permutation of Kevin for a communist who'd never been beyond the Midwest. "Thought so. You just like smashing up the death profiteers' capital, right?" Clayton knows barely anything of Kiev beyond his political leanings, but Kiev's silence tells Clayton he doesn't need to know. The rhythm they both feel is connection enough. Anything more would be sentimental.

Clayton hefts the sledge again and lets out a long breath a bit at a time. He has to acknowledge the vibrance of breaking something valuable, of damage that reverberates. If destruction is a creative act—and it is, he thinks, envisioning walnut-sized chunks of granite as notes exploding from his instrument—this is his first performance piece. The blank headstones and statues may not be Monet paintings, but Clayton could still be the man who put his fist through the canvas.

During his long nights of secret labor, the obliteration of a rusted-out car left in a factory lot, the clang of metal zig-zagging up his arms and into the oblivious air, are his only creations. Since he was sixteen and rice dinners couldn't save enough in the budget to keep up with cello rental, since he dropped out of school and stopped thinking in four-four measures, Clayton found expression in violence. It doesn't matter whether his butcher-counter pay could get him an instrument and a tutor—Clayton the cellist, a potential self never actualized, dipped his head to the floor, snapped his bow over his knee, and walked off stage. With every swing, Clayton shatters possibility, demolishes old selves.

The score in his head is so deafening that the scream is one alto note, punctuating the chaos of noise that started as “Ride of the Valkyries.” Dax’s sledge thumps to the dirt as he tears past Clayton. Still trying to clear the ringing in his head, Clayton follows him to the other side of Dorsett’s largest mausoleum, a Victorian-style tomb with a stark steeple on each corner.

A hush stops up Clayton’s ears, leaving only the screech of breath from his chest. Kiev’s mouth gapes without sound. With his arms flung out to his sides and his lower half invisible beneath the tumble of concrete pinning him, Kiev looks like a hand puppet, caught in a moment of comical surprise.

“Did you take out this load-bearing column?” Clayton puts his weight against the stone to test it. The structure lurches and protests.

“Shut the fuck up and help me pull him out.” Dax digs his fingers into Kiev’s armpits and tugs, but stumbles back when Kiev screams again and begs not to be moved. His contorted expression is closer to a smile than Clayton has ever seen on him.

Dax paces two steps, wipes concrete dust through his hair, and yanks his phone from his pocket. His thumb jabs 9-1-1.

“Hey, stupid. You know what follows the ambulance?” It will be loud when the police come. Sirens, shouting. Gunshots. Clayton grabs the phone and shoves Dax back. “Get the hammers.”

When they use the sledges to lever the blocks off Kiev’s legs, handles bowing slightly under the mass, Clayton ignores Kiev’s groans and keeps his eyes fixed on the lamp across the street.

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He blinks, and the oval of light from the street lamp reappears as the fluorescent bulb directly overhead in the emergency waiting area. On a Wednesday night, the ER is sparsely populated with patients Clayton assumes can't see a doctor any other way, a coughing man with bald patches in his wiry, gray hair and a woman covered in shiny boils, her swollen fingers tickling the infant on the seat next to her. He and Dax have a group of four seats to themselves, with two empty in the middle.

When the pair pushed through the door, hefting a pale and sweating Kiev between them, the nurses brought a gurney right away. They wheeled him out a few minutes later. Not like the last time Clayton sat pulling at his fingernails in the ER, after Dax's then-boyfriend had broken a chair over Dax's head and cracked his skull. After two hours in the waiting room that night, Dax was hunched over with his arms wrapped around his legs, like he was taking cover. Clayton kept a hand poised over Dax's back, not touching him, restraining the urge to jump up and fight the nurse at the desk.

He recalls the incident to Dax. "You were using my t-shirt for the blood, and people looked at me like I was a jerk for being shirtless." He shouldn't have ruined the silence, but it felt like a lie to act like strangers, as if they only know each other when the cadence of shattering glass makes conversation for them.

"So sorry for all the trouble."

"Don't be like that."

The baby across the room starts to cry, but gurgles instead, like it's choking on something. With his shoe, Dax traces the diamond shapes in the linoleum, then slams his heel down. "I know what you two talk about."

"Kiev and me, talk?"

“About what a big fucking mistake I am.”

The swinging doors Kiev went through move slightly as a door closes somewhere else, and Clayton wishes the conversation would dissipate into the air. “You’re not a mistake. You just do stupid shit. Get involved with bad people.”

“But you’re not one of them, right? You’re different?”

“Sure. I’m different.”

Dax stands in front of Clayton. His bootlaces cross at all the wrong places, a tangled mess yanked into a knot. “You’re better, then? Better than anything else I got in my life?”

“I’ve seen what you got.” As much as he didn’t want to comment any further on Dax’s personal life, maybe Dax would take something from their talk. Something about not hanging on to the shit that hurts you.

“Clayton.”

When Clayton lifts his head, Dax leans down and presses their mouths together. The scrape of Dax’s cracked lips reminds Clayton of wiping blood from his mouth with a knuckle. He shoves Dax away so hard that Dax stumbles against the next row of seats. The coughing man watches them over his shoulder, chin tucked down into his collar.

“I’m—it’s not like that,” Clayton says. This is why they shouldn’t talk. Words get mixed up, made to mean something more than sounds in air. Necessary barriers are broken. And Dax, as always, judges Clayton wrong.

Dax opens and closes his fists, not seeming to feel the stares of the waiting room’s other occupants. “Kiev wanted his dick sucked, but anything more than that was beneath him, too. He said I’m a tire fire. Too much trouble to get involved with me.”

“Tire fire. That’s exactly what this shit with Dorsett is.”

Dax laughs and flings himself down on the chair Clayton pushed him into. “You liked it. You were into it like I’ve never seen you before.” His sideways grin reveals a sharp canine, his voice a stabbing note. “You loved destroying something that *belongs* to somebody, doesn’t matter who. Doesn’t even matter about Kiev. I bet you’d like to try breaking some bones yourself.”

Clayton doesn’t point out the hypocrisy. In the staring, bloodshot eyes and the bootheel pounding the floor without discernable beat, he recognizes the same Dax who gives a shrill whistle when he saunters up to a demo site, 9 iron resting across his shoulders. Dax’s words are the tee shot, and he’s just waiting for the “squish,” the imagined sound effect of harm. Clayton shakes his head at the floor. “You need fucking therapy.”

“I thought that’s what this was.” Dax sweeps his arms out to the sides, casts around the waiting room like he wants the other patients to weigh in on whether mass property damage is a healthy coping mechanism.

With his eyes closed, Clayton can almost think of nothing, can almost make the thumping at his temples stop.

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In the stinging, noon sunlight, the shattered monuments don’t have the kind of stark poetry as two nights before. They project the same sense of waste as an abandoned shopping mall or a garden plot strangled with ragweed. Or a man lying drugged in a hospital bed, legs so pulverized they won’t ever heal right. Clayton coasts his truck into the grass by the road, leaves it in gear and lets the engine stall with a jerk.



A broken line of police tape snaps in the wind, and a thrill skips through Clayton. Even in its sad state, the lot hums with the ecstatic possibility he felt before. He returned to the scene to draw up some absolving guilt, to prove Dax wrong, but the twinge is drowned by the tingling feeling of something new, of a fresh pleasure all his own. It had been fun. And more than that, the destruction had eased something in him, had become a surrogate for some damage he'd never taken accounting of.

Under his feet, marble and concrete grind into the dust. He savors the dry crunch, the sound in miniature of the statues crumbling. When could he do another demolition like this, one with risk and consequences? Should he choose someone who deserved it, or was it better not to know?

As Clayton rounds the Victorian mausoleum, to the heap of gray stone that broke Kiev, a shock of color halts him. A woman is bent over, gathering up scraps of police tape. When she turns and spots Clayton, she tucks the wadded plastic under one arm, but doesn't offer her hand. He trades names with Ann Dorsett.

"Police not coming back?" Clayton sweeps the lot with his eyes, wondering what clues he might have left.

Ann presses a fist to her hip, just below the hem of her red, floral button-down, tied above her navel. When she follows Clayton's gaze, the wind tugs strands of hair the color of clay dust from her ponytail. "I have to get this mess sorted. Like it is, it's just an invitation for more damage."

"You think?" Clayton assumed the Dorsett that Dax hated was a man, but Dax never specified. Ann's ring finger is bare.

“It attracts attention, and not the paying customer kind. I’m guessing you’re not here to buy. Not that we have much to choose from.”

“Just rubbernecking.”

“I thought rubbernecking was when you stay in your car and mind your own business.” Clayton starts to apologize, but Ann tilts her head to the side and laughs, hoarse and clipped.

“Insurance going to cover this?” Even with the victim in front of him, slight love handles squeezed in her high-waisted jeans and pink nose sloping toward a smile, Clayton isn’t sure what he’d prefer. If Dorsett’s insurance pays out, his work would be swept away, the repercussions undone.

“Truth to tell, if half my stock had to get smashed, I wish I could have done the smashing. You ever throw a glass or something when you’re really mad? It feels so fucking good. Doesn’t make you any less mad, but it feels right.”

Clayton doesn’t respond, half-convinced her bluntness is a trick, but Ann’s focus is somewhere else. “Must be the chemicals in your brain, or something.” She presses her lips together. “Like sex.”

“Do you have guys to help haul this stuff away? Equipment?”

“I guess I look pretty silly out here by myself.” Ann flings the bundle of tape above her head. Most falls in a clump at her feet, but a few pieces twist on the breeze like charred scraps of fireworks and land atop the remnants of tombstones. “I was getting stressed out stewing over all the work to be done, but I don’t think breaking a glass will help.”

Clayton coughs, wipes his mouth on his sleeve. Too much dust in the air.

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Ann's rougher than he's prepared for, rougher than he's ever had, but Clayton adjusts quickly. She doesn't have to teach him how to cut off airflow without damaging her windpipe. When she struggles to draw out a gasp and her short nails dig into his shoulders, his guilt and euphoria are interchangeable. Exhaustion washes through his limbs as a prickly heat, the same way it does after a demolition, and the triumph and shame of both events conflate.

At least, that's how Clayton explains it to himself, in the split-second he decides to empty his guts while lying naked on the futon in his apartment, comforter tangled up around his ankles.

"You think it would be fun to wreck your own place?" On some level, past initial anger, she had to understand. With Ann, he could cross the distance between human beings and show her the redemption he created at the end of the hammer's arc. She might not forgive him, but she would validate his impulse.

Already dressed, Ann sits on the mattress with her back against the wall, pulling tangles out of her hair. "I said so. A tombstone firm isn't where I want to end up."

"It was me. Me and some guys I know, Dax and Kiev."

Her hand stops mid-stroke, and her fingers stick claw-like through the locks as though she's yanking out fistfuls of hair. "Was it fun?"

Clayton drags himself up on his elbow, wishing he'd put his pants on before confessing, wishing he hadn't told her at all, wishing he'd drunk himself into unconsciousness that afternoon instead of skulking around Dorsett Monuments. Why did

every conversation leave him in a worse spot than before? What about his mouth made dynamite of his words? “I’ve got nothing against you.”

“I asked if it was fun.”

“What do you want me to say? It felt like the best thing I’d ever done.” Clayton snags his shirt from the floor and drags it over his head, using the moment to think. Did Ann suspect, when he met her on the lot? Did she know, when she climbed into his truck and stretched her freckled arm out the window, like she was showing it off to him?

“I guess I have to tell my husband. He’s majority owner.” He must be the majority target of Dax’s grudge.

Clayton lets his eyes unfocus on the hem of the bedsheet, the tiny stitches mesmerizing in their uniformity. When he laid the truth in front of her, he had no cause to expect anything different. He should have foreseen that he would be the main casualty of the night’s work.

With a little jerk of her head, Ann resumes her combing, faster than before.

“Maybe you can help me with something.”

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Kiev’s eyes, half-hidden as always, dog Clayton’s every step around the hospital room. Perched on the windowsill, Dax glares down onto the parking lot three stories below.

Neither man had spoken since Clayton explained the agreement he made: in exchange for Ann keeping their secret, he and Dax would return to Dorsett Monuments to demo as much as they could in the office. Except Dax had almost spat on him, and Kiev wouldn’t deign to even nod or shake his head.

“This is your grudge, Dax.” Clayton stops at the foot of the bed and grips the rail. “You won’t see it done?” The overlapping chatter of hospital staff and rattle of wheels fill the constricting air around them. “What did Dorsett do to piss you off, anyway? I’m talking to you, Dax.”

“Beat me at cards.”

“Bullshit.”

Dax shrugs, wraps his arms around his chest. Whatever hurt and anger he had stored behind his ribs, he wouldn’t let Clayton see.

With a glance toward the open door, Clayton steps between the other two. “This is a two-man job.” After the alarm went off, Ann would give them some time before calling it in, but he’d need help to make the building a ruin before the cops arrived.

Dax slides off the windowsill. The top of his head reaches Clayton’s nose. “You and Dorsett’s wife...this is bad people and stupid shit. This is a goddamn tire fire.” Kiev gives no sign that he recognizes the phrase. In Kiev’s habitual silence, Clayton has no way to tell how strongly the morphine is affecting Kiev.

His back to Kiev, Clayton takes Dax’s hands, grips tighter when Dax tries to pull them away. “Maybe this plan is a mistake.”

“Yours to make.”

“But you won’t let me make it alone.”

Dax’s hands tense in Clayton’s grasp. Clayton didn’t say what happened between meeting Ann and confessing to her, but surely Dax knew. He has his own collection of stupid decisions tied to sex. Dax’s history suggests he understands the way destructive acts follow each other.

When Dax finally turns his face toward him, jaw clenched tight, Clayton kisses him roughly, like he's making an argument. Dax hesitates, returns the kiss for a few seconds without relaxing, then pulls away. Behind his back, Clayton knows Kiev must be staring now, betraying interest for the first time.

"You're a son of a bitch." Dax steps back to the windowsill, to the chair across the room, apparently finds nowhere far enough. When he stomps out the door, he bumps shoulders with a nurse on her way in. The call button on Kiev's bed is flashing.

Clayton wants to wait at the window, to see whether Dax thumps down on the bench by the entrance, or kicks over the trash can, or sits fuming in his car. Maybe manipulating Dax wouldn't sting so much, except Clayton knows he isn't the first. Isn't the best thing in Dax's life, either.

Maybe Clayton could acknowledge some attraction to Dax, against everything he believed about himself, but he would have to admit to being no different from the boyfriends that string Dax along and use him up. He yanks the blinds down and turns his back to the window.

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The streetlamp over Dorsett Monuments hums, tuneless but insistent. It vibrates through their metal bats. The window of the main office bursts at Clayton's touch, spraying its fragments inward like sparks. Dax climbs through and holds out his hand to help Clayton, nearly crushes Clayton's fingers when he pulls him in.

Dax gives his high-pitched whistle and twirls his bat. "Silent alarm."

Clayton nods, but he doesn't hear any silence. The ringing glass, now chiming under their feet, started the music. A precise swing launches the cash register from the

counter, and the drawer springs open like a tongue shooting out of a dead cartoon character's mouth. Dax's laugh is too loud in the confined space, too harsh, when the phone jumps from the desk in tiny plastic bits. The comical pictures clash with the music in Clayton's head. Not an orchestra, this time—overlapping not-songs, discordant noises battling to be heard over the others.

There is no division between the two men, no distinction between whose hands or which bat reduces an object to its component parts. When their jagged exhales synchronize, they seem to share a thought, to bare a secret. Fragments of flower pot flee in all directions, throwing potting soil as confetti. A wooden chair crumples. Framed plaques remember gravity and plummet. Each swing is not the drawing of a cello's bow, not a response to instruction or repetition of a pre-established pattern. The strikes are the instant of creation, a conductor composing in the moment. For every flick of the wrist, an answering sound, a devastating reply.

When the sirens begin, they seep through and drown out the other sounds, an undercurrent. Blue lights glance off the claws of glass still clinging to the window frame, and Clayton blinks as though breaking through the surface of dark water. Whether returning to the air or plunging down again, he isn't sure. "It's too soon. Ann promised me six minutes."

His bat clangs against the tile. Did Ann pluck this cruel idea from her brain with a handful of coarse, red hair? Or had she somehow seen it even earlier—when his fingers closed on her throat, did she imagine her own nails digging into his neck? Clayton's voice is distant to himself when he interrupts again. "Do you think Kiev tipped them off?"

The silence smacks him. Dax is in the wind, leaving nothing but a burn trail only Clayton can see. Whether Dax heard the sirens first or was waiting for them from the start, Clayton doesn't care. What does it matter which friend or lover was trying to destroy him? They all have reason, blossoming resentments that Clayton planted—flowers springing from the dust of headstones.

A desperate kick forces open the back door. The cars are still swarming into the front lot, tires grinding gravel like bone on bone. Clayton runs, knowing it will make no difference. When he leaps over the wreckage in his path, he is suspended, unaffected by the light and sound washing over him. Only the rhythm in his chest and head is real, the crashing that threatens to shatter him from the inside out.



## ON BLEECKER STREET

Scholars packed the front rows of the lecture hall like shelves of blank-faced books. The tweed-jacketed men on either side of Lucinda radiated heat, and the corner of her mouth twitched as a bead of sweat rolled down into her moustache. The spirit gum would hold if she didn't disturb it, but her horsehair whiskers tingled in the humidity.

Dr. Weyland Epperson, the darling of Columbia University's poetry studies since 1885, always drew crowds when he gave a public lecture. His style had made him as successful a speaker as an academic, with his deep voice that rose suddenly in pitch when he came to a key point, his constant half-smile that challenged his listeners, and his way of standing on tiptoe to lean over the podium as though waiting for an answer. His lecture on Shakespeare's sonnets might have kept the crowd engrossed, if they hadn't been focused on gently fanning themselves with their notebooks and homburgs. A man in front of Lucinda dabbed his mouth with a handkerchief, examined a spot on the cloth, and tucked it away.

When the lecture was over and most of the listeners shuffled toward the exits, flapping their jackets to circulate air through their damp dress shirts, Lucinda approached Dr. Epperson. She readied her introduction—squared shoulders, tight handshake, confident tone—but the man with the handkerchief already had Epperson's attention.

The young man gripped an amethyst-topped cane in one hand and a gold fountain pen, which he twirled as he spoke, in the other. His sandy hair was greased back into a wave that matched the gentle curl of his moustache.

“If you make another specialty of Shakespeare, I’ll be obsolete,” the young man said. The cane swung back and forth, brushing bystanders’ pants legs. “Not very collegial of you.”

“Or you’ll be forced to branch out, and we’ll all find out what else you know.” Wrinkles deepened in the gray circles beneath Epperson’s eyes as he squinted, then winked. “You wouldn’t want to rest on your laurels.”

When Lucinda took her chance to speak, the interruption made Epperson jump as he drew out his pocket watch. “I thought your lecture was very interesting,” she said. Was her voice still too high? Epperson thanked Lucinda and paused to let her continue, but her gaze was drawn to the other man, to his narrow cheekbones and shapely lips, to the slightly oily texture around his mouth and along his jaw. Lucinda introduced herself as Robert Sage, but managed nothing else before Epperson snapped his watch shut and excused himself, leaving the last two audience members alone.

When the blond man focused on her, Lucinda understood what drew her to him. The fine hairs of his moustache were likely less itchy than hers, but in the stifling room, the dull sheen beneath them was the same. Sweat mixed with spirit gum.

Lucinda waited until he gave his name: Dr. Edmond Wright, Assistant Professor of English. “And what are you called when you wear a dress?” she said.

Edmond closed the door by the stage and planted himself in front of it. His eyes jumped to the top of the rows, where the back door was already closed. “How did you—what do you want?” The cane struck the floor in quick taps. “Wait.” He wiped the charcoal from Lucinda’s brow with his thumb. “You should use witch hazel and water to make your powders stick better. But how did you find me out?”

“A guess. Very embarrassing if I had been wrong.” Edmond’s hard stare stopped her laugh. “I saw myself. This heat is bad for my makeup, and it’s affecting yours the same way.”

Edmond pressed down his facial hair with his fingertips. “It scares me to think it could be that easy.”

“My real name’s Lucinda, not Robert.” She sat down in the front row and crossed her ankles. “You must have been dressing as a man for a long time to have a man’s job here.”

“My family called me Aggie. But publicly I am Edmond. I have been for years.” His teeth showed when he smiled. “I knew there were others like me.”

“Robert is my plan to become an academic. To do what you do.”

Edmond folded his arms, holding the cane tightly to his chest. “Do you also have a dead brother with a doctorate? Makeup will only get you so far.”

“Not far enough.” Lucinda took off her bowler and turned it in her hands. A few strands of long hair fell out from beneath her carefully pinned wig. Using the invented name got her papers more attention, but women’s college was out of her reach on a seamstress’ wage, and she couldn’t get any further without a physical person and a formal education behind her work.

Edmond fell into the seat beside Lucinda and draped his arm over the back of her chair. “What you need is an advocate.” He invited her to the faculty gathering that Friday, as his date, and offered to introduce her to his colleagues. If she didn’t find success as Lucinda, Edmond said, she could use the contacts as Mr. Sage.

Lucinda tugged at a lock of his hair and found that it was attached. “Aggie, right? Short for Agnes? Edmond suits you better.”

“You learn fast, Robert.” He clapped her on the back before jumping up to see her out.

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When Lucinda trotted up to the library, three blocks from where she’d hopped off the horsecar, Edmond stood on one foot with his back against the wall, letting the cigarette between his fingers go out. “You have a handsome figure,” he said. “I would never have known, with that hideous sack coat you wore last time.”

The warmth of his compliment didn’t faze Lucinda. “Now I’m wishing for the sack coat,” she said, adjusting her feathered hat on her mound of coiled hair. “I look overdressed.” Edmond’s cuffed trousers, powder blue blazer, and neat boater were more suited to lawn tennis than cocktails with the dean.

“My colleagues like to see that I’m human. They still expect ladies to look divine.” He offered her his arm and guided her into the library, where the high-backed leather chairs had been arranged in clusters at the edges of the open central area, and the tables held punch and dainty quiches instead of books. The older men, buttoned to the chin in starched shirts, occupied the chairs, while the assistant professors stood around the tables, knocking the ash from their cigarettes into half-empty glasses. Their wives stood apart near the back of the room, creating shifting splashes of color with their wide-brimmed hats that bobbed as they laughed and sipped their drinks.

As promised, Edmond started conversations between Lucinda and most of the notable academics in his college, but her observations on the metaphysical poets didn’t

seem to impress them. One associate professor remarked that Lucinda would make a fine governess, if she were unfortunate enough to need employment; Lucinda didn't mention that she worked five days a week in a dress shop, making alterations. Her feet ached, even though she'd been on them for only an hour, and the roof of her mouth was tangy from the over-sweetened punch. And Edmond had always stepped away by the time a colleague brought up Edmond's assumed relationship to Lucinda, how relieved they were that he was finally showing interest in settling down. If she needed a literary hobby, one professor said, why not help Edmond with the journal? She thanked him for the suggestion.

The men Edmond was standing with didn't pause their conversation as Lucinda drew him away to a quiet corner, but most either grinned at him or stared down at their drinks, waiting to watch the scolding. Lucinda pulled her gloves from her purse and slapped them against her palm. "You're just like a man after all, and I'm leaving."

"Why? You've been making such a good impression."

"A good impression for you. To show everyone that you're a proper man looking for a proper wife."

"This is as much for you as it is for me." Edmond's voice rose in pitch. "Stay just another hour, until people start to leave."

"You took advantage of Lucinda. If you want her to stay, you have to do something for Robert."

"What do you want, Robert?"

Lucinda raised her chin. In her heeled boots, she was barely taller than Edmond.

"I want you to publish one of my essays."

He glanced around at the other guests, but no one was impolite enough to stare. “You have no qualifications.”

“In that case, enjoy the party, Aggie.” Lucinda swished her skirts against Edmond as she turned to leave, but he took hold of her sleeve. A woman dressed in mauve, still carrying her coat and parasol, hurried toward them with dainty steps and called to Edmond. She was beautiful, if not for the large pink birthmark in the center of her face.

With his lips close to Lucinda’s ear, Edmond wrapped an arm around her. “You have to be convincing. The same goes for your essay.”

“I was delayed at the women’s home, and I was afraid I wouldn’t make it.” With the woman’s flushed cheeks deepening the color of her birthmark, she looked like a strawberry, pockmarked and sweet.

Pearl Epperson winced when Edmond introduced her as his dear friend. “I guess I arrived too late.” When she shook her head, her gold chandelier earrings caught the light in a dozen facets. By Lucinda’s estimation, there was more money dangling from Pearl’s ears than the women at the shelter would ever see in their lives. There was nothing cruel, then, in taking something from her.

Lucinda grabbed Pearl’s hand and squeezed it, saying she had longed to meet “the darling Pearl” since returning from France. As for “Eddie,” Lucinda said they had been exchanging letters since meeting in an art museum.

“You should see the poems she wrote me.” Edmond drew Lucinda closer and leaned his head against hers. The color receded from Pearl’s face.

The eucalyptus scent of Edmond’s cologne irritated Lucinda, and she was ready to end the scene. Lucinda turned Edmond’s face to hers and pulled him into a brief kiss,

nothing too outrageous, but enough to deliver the tang of spirit gum. Holding back a laugh, she ran a finger over her lips to check that she hadn't removed any of Edmond's false facial hairs.

Pearl twisted her parasol in her hands. "I need some punch. I'm feeling a little light-headed."

When Lucinda joined her ten minutes later, punch had stained Pearl's lips red. Pearl twirled her glass by the stem and stared at the dregs. "Is this just juice? I was hoping they'd have champagne."

"You'd make quite the hostess." Lucinda pulled up a chair. She had expected to find Pearl crying, letting childish tears fall into her punch, but Pearl's clear eyes and slight frown were thoughtful.

"You don't have to make nice with me." Pearl picked at a loose bead on her dress. "I don't fight over men."

"How much do you really know about Edmond?"

Pearl jerked her head up and glared at Lucinda, then sunk back in her seat. "More than you." She touched the tear in Lucinda's secondhand gloves. "Do you know why I'm still unmarried at twenty-five? Because my appearance doesn't lie. I'm exactly what I appear to be."

"Is Edmond what he appears to be?" Lucinda held her breath in the pause, but Pearl just sighed.

"Men can have their secrets. I don't care. I know all I need to."

When she stood to leave, Lucinda took the empty glass from Pearl's hands.

"Twenty-five is not so old. I'm twenty-seven."

“What did Edmond say about me?”

“He said you wouldn’t pine after him for long.” She gave Pearl a quick kiss on top of her head.

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When Lucinda took Edmond’s offer to share a cab, she didn’t realize he lived in the rich residential area of Upper Manhattan, only a quarter mile from the university. “So the sport outfit is just for show. You wouldn’t want to dirty it by walking a few blocks.”

Edmond opened the door for Lucinda before following her into the cramped back seat of the electric cab. “We’re going to your place first.” The driver nodded when Lucinda gave her address.

She slapped the upholstered cushion. “Not sure fancy seats are worth the fare.”

“You haven’t really been abroad, have you?”

“Only if Pennsylvania counts.” Corinthian columns flickered by the windows as the cab left the campus. “How long were you involved with Pearl?”

“I wasn’t, exactly. Epperson helped me get my position. He wants me to marry her, and I didn’t have a good reason to refuse.”

“So you invented one.”

“Maybe not a good enough reason. The longer I stay a bachelor, the more suspicious people get. And it’s not Pearl’s fault she got attached to who she thought I was.”

Outside the cab, well-kept parks and townhouses gave way to packed tenements that spilled their residents—laughing, fighting, selling comfort foods of the Old World—onto the street. While the car was stopped at an intersection, two children wove around a



fishmonger's stall, chasing a dog with a pig's foot in its mouth. "She was a little heartbroken," Lucinda said, "but she'll be all right."

"How can a person be only a little heartbroken?"

"I have been, plenty of times. Sometimes a little is all you're allowed."

"I'm not sure I understand."

Lucinda placed her hand over Edmond's, warm on cold. "Yes, you do. Or you wouldn't wake up early every morning to make yourself up."

They bumped along the road in silence, and Lucinda wondered how much the driver could hear through the dividing curtain. Maybe passengers' private dramas were his entertainment on the job, just as she soaked up wealthy customers' gossip at the dress shop.

"It's not that I dislike Pearl," Edmond said as they rode down Bleeker Street. The dives were opening for the night, and half-dressed patrons passed through the narrow doorways into darkness. "I could be happy with her as my wife. But she doesn't feel the same way. I almost gave myself away trying to find out, and that was the last time I could be alone with her."

"You wanted to marry Pearl?" Lucinda said. Edmond started to pull his hand away, but she held it. "I thought you would want someone more intellectual."

The car squealed to a rest outside Lucinda's gray brick apartment building in the Bowery. Edmond leaned toward her, but Lucinda thrust the door open and climbed out. "I'll send you my article. I look forward to seeing it in print."

Edmond waved and tapped the back of the driver's seat. The hum of the little car hadn't yet died away when Lucinda yanked her hair down and shook the pins free. The

lights flicked on over the saloon next door, and a man with a long braid stamped out a cigarette, but no one was around who cared what she looked like.

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A week after Lucinda had left the hefty envelope at the post office, Edmond appeared at the door of her third floor apartment. Dressed in a plain gray sack coat with no vest, he matched any of Lucinda's Lower Manhattan neighbors. "It's you. Good. The name on the mailbox was smudged."

"Is the journal already out?" Lucinda's loose cotton shirt fell untucked past her waist, and her stockings had picked up tufts of dust from the floor.

"Is now inconvenient?" Edmond slipped inside and hung his coat and homburg on the rack.

"Not if it's good news." She showed him to a sturdy rocking chair, the best in the apartment's cramped main room, which served as both sitting area and kitchen. She sunk into a ragged armchair by the wood stove.

"Epperson suspects plagiarism. Dr. Robert Sage has no reputation."

"I didn't call myself 'doctor.'"

With a long exhale, Edmond tipped the chair back as far as it would go. "I did. I couldn't publish you otherwise."

Lucinda didn't argue for the nights she'd spent marking and re-marking her books, scratching out phrases with a stub of pencil. If this was the end of her academic career, maybe she should be glad it had never really begun.

She shuffled her feet on the faded rug, sending up lazy eddies of dust. "Your outfit is a mess this afternoon. Your moustache is practically ragged."

“Some days, I don’t feel like being Edmond,” he said, his eyes closed.

“And then you’re Aggie?”

“When I’m alone, I am Aggie.”

From the dry sink atop the cabinet in the corner, Lucinda brought the wash basin, a rag, and a small bottle of isopropyl alcohol. “May I?” She waited for his nod before peeling away his moustache, an immaculate construction of human hairs over silk netting. Edmond endured the scrubbing with his head tipped back and his hands clasped.

As Lucinda wiped away makeup, Edmond’s bold jaw and wide nose gave way to more feminine features. Thick brows narrowed and pale lips grew fuller and pinker, but the basic forms remained. Like a different angle of the same idea, Lucinda thought.

“Sorry it’s cold.”

“You don’t have to be so gentle.”

She willed her hands not to shake. “Such a shame you wear all this paint. You’re very handsome, Aggie.”

“Wasn’t I before?”

“That’s different. This is you.” Lucinda brushed the towel across Aggie’s cheek, though the makeup was gone. “Don’t you think?”

“Most of the time, I do. It would be easier if I could make Edmond be my real self, but it feels too much like putting on my brother’s skin.” Aggie looked down at her body, crumpled in the chair like a coat left behind after a party. “Wretched.”

“Hush. You’re not wretched.” Lucinda tried to sit on the arm of the chair, but the added weight threatened to tip it over, so she settled on Aggie’s lap. Her fingers worked down the buttons of Aggie’s dress shirt. “Nothing wretched here except these

uncomfortable bindings.” At Aggie’s touch on her wrist, Lucinda froze, fingers trailing the tucked end of the long linen strip. The constricting length of cloth dug into the skin below Aggie’s arms, forced her chest to fit Edmond’s shape.

“You can take it off yourself. I won’t look.” To prove it, Lucinda turned away and covered her eyes. She would wait however long it took to see Aggie.

“You might as well do it. I can’t maneuver my arms with you sitting on me.”

Lucinda slipped the cloth around and around, letting it drop to the floor. Sharp pink lines crisscrossed Aggie’s small breasts, and Lucinda resisted the urge to trace them with her fingertips, to smooth away the marks. “You’re binding too tight.”

Blood returned to the surface as Aggie massaged the irritated skin. She kept her eyes down. “Are you the authority now? I know what I’m doing. And I’ve seen how tightly you cinch your corset.”

“You’re hurting yourself, and you don’t need to. You could get away with less.”

“Was this your plan? To undress me and lecture me?”

“I don’t have a plan.” Lucinda slid off Aggie’s lap. “Would you like something else to wear? A dress or a shirtwaist?”

With a low laugh, Aggie buttoned her shirt over her bare chest. “Do you think I dress myself up like a Gibson Girl when I’m alone at home?”

“I’m sure I don’t know. Maybe you wear nothing at all when you’re at home.”

Aggie shook her head, but didn’t hide her grin. “You are a walking, talking scandal. Woe to any man who associates with you.”

“But not to you.” Lucinda folded up her sleeves and slipped into her house shoes. “I’m about to draw a bath, if you’re interested in staying.”

Aggie's gaze moved to the shed clothing on the floor. "You want me to stay?"

"You don't want to be Edmond today. So don't. When was the last time Aggie Wright shared a quiet afternoon with someone else?"

"Not since Eddie died." She shut her eyes tight for a second before rising. "You can carry the water, since I can't go out like this, but I'll heat it."

Aggie carted water from the stove to the tub in the next room, reading a few pages from one of Lucinda's books in between trips. A knock stopped Lucinda at the door as she was on her way to the faucet downstairs for another bucketful. Aggie's book snapped shut.

"Get in the bedroom." The warped door groaned against the frame when Lucinda yanked it open.

With Weyland Epperson's searching eyes on her, Lucinda wished that she were done up in her harsh heeled boots and smart black dress, with all the steel supports layered beneath. Or better yet, that she were dressed as Robert, in whatever he might wear to intimidate the man on her threshold.

When Lucinda asked what he wanted, Epperson stepped inside and dropped his hat on the hook beside the gray homburg. "I'm looking for an answer. This was the address on a paper by Dr. Robert Sage. Are you his maid? His wife?"

The water on the stove bubbled over the rim of the pot. Lucinda hadn't decided how to answer before Epperson cut her off.

"Does he meet here to—what is Dr. Sage's relationship with Edmond Wright?"

Lucinda's breath seemed to scrape her lungs raw. She wished she had put away the pile of Edmond's clothes, at least shoved them under the chair.

Epperson apparently didn't expect a response right away, because he pulled a thick Donne collection from the bookshelf and flipped through it as he paced the length of the room, his leather shoes making shushing sounds across the carpet. Lucinda pictured Aggie with her ear pressed to the bedroom door, bare face paling as Aggie realized it wasn't plagiarism that concerned Epperson.

"Not your secret to tell?" The book still open in one hand, Epperson spun around and reached for the bedroom door.

"I wrote the essay." Her whole body was tense, ready to leap between Epperson and the door. There would be nowhere, in the room that barely fit Lucinda's pallet and the bureau holding her clothes, for Aggie to hide. "Robert Sage is a name I made up."

"*You're* Dr. Wright's lover. My daughter said—it doesn't matter." Epperson glanced between Lucinda and her annotations. "Where did you study?"

She couldn't read his tone. Surely he knew what part of the city he was in, what kind of people lived there. Surely he saw the cracks in the walls and the set of chipped dishes, enough to serve two. "By the stove, mostly. It gets cold in here."

"I didn't mean to offend you. You have some good ideas, but the paper wasn't up to our standards."

Lucinda nodded. She wouldn't apologize to Epperson for taking a name like his, especially when the name couldn't make up the difference between them. Robert Sage, whoever he might become, still had limitations.

Epperson set the book gingerly back in its place, as though afraid to remind Lucinda he had seen it. He stared at the hats on the rack for a moment before grabbing his own. "Tell Edmond he doesn't owe me anything. Pearl will be all right. She always is."

When Epperson had left, Lucinda searched the dirty linen pile for something to take the overflowing pot off the stove. From the bedroom, Aggie's voice was almost too quiet to hear. "You didn't have to do that."

"You know I did." Steam rose from the tub as Lucinda dumped in the water, and she waited as the clouds broke over her face.

"You gave up Robert for me."

"I didn't give him up. Half the clothes in that bureau are his." She kicked off her shoes and unbuttoned her shirtwaist. "I'll get in the bath first, if that's all right with you."

"So long as I can have a cigarette."

Lucinda lowered herself into the tub, sliding down until the water was up to her chin. "Burn the place down."

Aggie stood in the bedroom doorway, her shirt hanging untucked and half-buttoned. Her hair had fallen from its pomaded wave over her eyes. The cigarette dangling from her lips wasn't lit.

"Read me something." Lucinda stretched her legs over the edge of the tub, and Aggie's eyes traced the line.

"I don't know anything about poetry. Do you have *Twelfth Night*?"

"Just get Marvell and pick one at random." Lucinda sunk under the water for a moment, letting the deep notes of Aggie's voice echo between the copper walls of the tub. Later, Edmond and Robert would wander the Bowery, where night embraced all the secret lives hidden in candle-lit tenements. On Bleeker Street, where shrouded doorways spoke welcome to lovers like them, they would stop at a saloon, talk literature over a few drinks, and go entirely unnoticed. Here, in her apartment, Lucinda would let herself drift,

for as long as the water was warm, for as long as Aggie's fingers played through her hair  
when Aggie crossed behind the tub, her words falling and rising.



## LOS ALAMOS FROM ABOVE

En route to the Grand Canyon with my ex-boyfriend, windows down and Illinois cornfields blowing by at Impressionist-painting speeds, it's hard not to imagine the torrent of my bad decisions sweeping me out the sunroof and slamming me onto the grill of the semi two car-lengths back. Or maybe I just wish that it would.

Andrew talks through the miles as swaths of farmland alternate with county seats, little towns full of businesses without names. He stares into the vanishing point as he tells me how hard it's been, breaking away from all he's known, but he looks at me when he says the sacrifice was worth it. Maybe he thinks he can drive away from his problems: from Indianapolis this morning to Arizona tomorrow. From present to past.

"Red-shouldered hawk." He tugs my sleeve, like he's seeing nature for the first time. "Ian, look." I spit my gum out the window and watch the road in case he starts to veer toward the bird. That's what Andrew does—swerves blindly toward whatever snatches his attention, whether it's a frivolous new hobby or the waiter ten years his junior who's pathetic and lonely enough to ignore Andrew's wedding band.

He asks if I'm still waiting tables, as if he plans to whisk me away to a privileged life on his modest civil engineer's salary. The restaurant I'm at now is a decadent temple to society, part of a company that pairs eateries with art galleries.

"The governor eats there," I say, because it's gentler than telling him I pull three hundred in tips on a good night.

"Doing well for yourself." Andrew rubs his chin like he's wiping away the frown.

His voice is smooth and wave-like as it was a year ago, and I let him talk on about his most recent visit with his twelve-year-old daughter. I only met his daughter once, when I rode along with Andrew to drop her at dance practice, but her nervous hands, tiny fingers twisting over each other like roiling water, have bothered me since then. Andrew didn't introduce me, didn't even allude to my presence. Did she understand who I was, in some intuitive way? Did I recognize my mother's lovers, at that age?

The thumps of rumble strips shake me out of my thoughts as Andrew activates the hazard lights and jerks the car onto the shoulder.

Andrew throws off his seatbelt. "Did you see that armadillo?"

The split-second image as we had passed by was clear enough: the little guy had come to rest at the end of a sickly red trail. "I'm not hungry, thanks."

"It moved."

I shut the driver's door he left open and thunk my feet onto the dash. "I've got hand sanitizer when you're done with the wildlife tour." He's jogging back down the highway, heat lines from the pavement distorting his figure. If I were like him, the kind of person to make meaning from images, that wavering form receding along the strip of blacktop might hurt me, might remind me of how we left off.

After I'd done the job of homewrecker, given Andrew the taste of freedom he needed, he had no more use for me. "Maybe someday," he said, someday after lawyers were paid and possessions divided and his child's days evenly segregated. "Maybe when hell throws a pride parade," I said, but I had known abandonment was coming. I know when I'm a sinking ship.

When he followed up a year after our split and offered to show me the country, I wasn't looking for a newly out divorcee who'd already dumped me. Andrew said he didn't care if romance was out of the question, but romance was the reason I said yes, because when we were together he clung so sweetly to me, his affection more personal than the rough attention I get from men in bars who make love to love themselves. I wanted to feel that heady excitement again, to live consequence-free in a moment from last year, but this trip isn't what I hoped. I can't pretend things haven't changed when Andrew gives me those too-long glances, wants to talk about the future, tries to impress me by running after roadkill.

Andrew cradles the armadillo against his chest, then opens his arms to let it tumble into my lap. The animal drags its bright pink nose along my arm, leaving a trail of thick mucus. The stub that remains of its tail rests against my leg, a flat, sticky piece of dark licorice.

"Andrew. Towel. Now." Only the creature's eyes, round and soft like a wet plum, keep me from flinging it into the ditch by the road. Little bastard looks like it's crying, if that were possible, glossy pools building at the ridge of its tiny eyelids. Can it feel fingers stroking its back? The bumps have a satisfying symmetry, like the even pattern of a basketball.

After helping me tuck the armadillo into one of his t-shirts, Andrew starts the car. "Look up the nearest vet?"

I offer the bundle to Andrew. "Pet it for a few minutes, and then we're putting it back."

"He needs help, Ian, just look at him."

“Only its tail is damaged. It’ll probably live.”

“He’s not trying to escape.” Andrew’s pleading eyes match the armadillo’s. His air of fragility is what made me vulnerable to him before. When I don’t respond, Andrew clicks on the turn signal.

Claws scrabble in my lap as the car bumps back onto the highway. One claw snags my shirt as I slip my phone from my pocket to search for a vet’s office.

“It’s twenty minutes out of our way.”

“Too bad we don’t have an emergency siren.” His grin shows off the nearly straight teeth of someone who’d had braces.

“Why are you so set on this?”

“You don’t feel bad for him?”

A shrill squeak from the bundle makes me jump. “We can’t fix all the world’s problems.”

A soft frown settles over Andrew’s face, and his hands twist on the steering wheel. When an inquisitive snout slips out of the shirt, I give the sandpapery skin a gentle scratch, and the snout retreats. I search “can humans get leprosy from armadillos” on my phone.

“Someone has to care.”

“No one ran over it on purpose.”

“But if no one acts, then all we have is regret.” His eyes jump between me and the road, but not to the burden in my lap.

“Christ.” With the armadillo in my lap and Andrew pushing ninety down the highway, I have to speak his language to make my point. When the car slows at the exit

for the animal hospital, I shove the door open and hold it with my foot. I toss the armadillo toward the tall grass and it rolls from my cupped arms, its feet pressed against its abdomen, claws pursed like tiny schemer's hands.

Andrew stomps the brake pedal, but the animal could be anywhere in the dense weeds. I stare directly into his eyes for the first time since we left this morning. "It's about letting go. Understand?"

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Halfway through Oklahoma, as afternoon slips by, we stop for gas at an exit whose sign is half-hidden by bent branches. I've been driving since the armadillo incident, while Andrew leans his head against the window and sulks.

On our way back toward the interstate, Andrew pulls my sleeve. He jabs the window as we pass a garish wooden sign: Atomic Age Museum, one mile on left. "Can we stop?"

Andrew loves museums, especially the kitsch kind. And he loves a chance to show me something, since most of our relationship was me teaching him: how to make love, how to be invisible, how to lie. He's probably been looking out for one of these tourist traps since we left Indiana. Slipping into my old habit, I give in. Maybe this will be the nostalgic moment I wanted. I follow the sign's arrow past the interstate on-ramp. "I guess we picked up some time by skipping the vet."

The museum's windowless, yellowed facade and grass-fissured parking lot don't speak to an optimistic future under the power of the atom. A bell rings when we enter, but no one appears, and we both feed five dollars into a kiosk to cross the clanking

turnstiles. On curl-edged posters, angular figures demonstrate how to duck and cover, how to report a Communist, how to use a radiation meter.

We pass through a doorway shaped like a bomb, its edges painted with metallic rivets. Andrew stumbles into a ring of striped tape that cordons off the main exhibit. Dozens of model buildings—barracks, shops, a water tower, a bright blue plastic pond—sit on a vinyl mat covered with painted roads and lawns. At the very edge, a cherry-red pickup sits in front of a wooden shack marked “Los Alamos Project Main Gate.” Andrew crouches next to the tiny people. Like a view from the Enola Gay, carrying the fruit of their research, a colony of scientists, soldiers, technicians, and their families stands frozen in one moment of 1945.

Andrew rolls the little die-cast pickup back and forth in front of the gate guards who perpetually wait for the driver’s pass. “Can you imagine leaving everything to hide out in the desert and build a bomb? As far as their neighbors knew, they must have disappeared.”

“From the looks of it, they were just moving to a new neighborhood.”

“Kind of like its own private world, wasn’t it?” His amber eyes skip around the display the same way he used to look at me: not all at once, but feature by feature, as though I were too fascinating to see all together.

At the next display, a red-and-white service station with a rocket motif advertises “atomic batteries” for forty-five cents. A handsome couple sits in a wheel-less Cadillac suspended on wires to simulate flying, the woman’s head cushioned on her hand as though no scientific breakthrough could make her feel alive again. “Nothing unusual here,” I say.

I meant it as a joke, but Andrew nods. “They look like the couples I see every day.” This time, his way of speaking in analogies doesn’t upset me. Ambiguity is all he knows. During our relationship, when we went out of town to intimate restaurants or to lazy afternoons on the lake, we didn’t talk about what we were to each other or what future we might have. All Andrew could have learned from me was how to be bitter and unavailable, how to keep yourself safe at the cost of your self. How to duck and cover.

“This is a different future. A different past,” I say. The woman in the car looks toward neither.

One afternoon early in our affair, after a few hours at a hotel, I picked up Andrew’s softened, leather wallet from the nightstand while he was showering. The DMV must have let him keep his old picture the last time he renewed his license, because the man in the photo didn’t have the wrinkles around his mouth or bags under his eyes that I loved so much. On one side of the wallet were all his credit cards, and on the other were photos: his daughter, about six, with a beagle puppy; his wife, laughing and holding a cake that had collapsed; the three of them at a drive-in movie, holding paper cups and popcorn bags.

When Andrew gently took the wallet from my hands, I didn’t know whether he was protecting the photos from me or me from the photos. For me to see them was an intrusion, as if I had walked into his home and stared at the family portraits along the stairwell, one by one. He finished drying his hair without putting the wallet down. “I guess I’m old-fashioned for keeping pictures in my wallet. Yours are probably all on your phone.”

“My what? Pictures of my kid?” I hadn’t mean to snap, but Andrew taking the wallet away had stung, like he was keeping me separate from the things he loved. When he took it back into the bathroom with him, I pressed my face into a pillow.

At the back of the Atomic Age Museum, an open office door reveals a kid of about eighteen, scrolling through photos of swimsuit models on his laptop. He nods as we pass, on our way to an alcove that holds the last exhibit. Four life-size mannequins appear monstrously out-of-scale next to the miniature Los Alamos. The middle-class American family—complete with dotted A-line dresses for mother and daughter, and knit shirts and rayon pants for father and son—huddles in a cardboard bomb shelter, blank faces upturned toward the nuclear holocaust presumably just above. Cans of Spam, Campbell’s soup, and Mary Kitchen hash line shelves all around them, labels neatly arranged to show the brands. When I pick up a can, the illusion breaks down: the creator of the scene, apparently unwilling to waste a sizeable trove of processed meat and condensed soup, emptied each can and resealed it.

Andrew rubs the hem of the father’s shirt. “How did they think a pantry in the basement would protect them?”

“No other choice?” The boy, hand raised to shield his face, has a cracked nub where his pinky should be. Maybe the boy was injured while descending the narrow ladder to the shelter. More likely, the mannequin was just bought used.

“Is this what my life looked like to you?” Andrew says.

For a moment, the humor of the low-budget tragedy in cardboard and plastic distracts me. “You’d never go for all this processed food.”

“But I imitated the families on the posters. On TV. In magazines.”



“It doesn’t have to be one or the other.” Father or lover. Husband or wife. True or false.

“Spam or Mary Kitchen?” When Andrew smiles, that crooked eye tooth makes my stomach turn over. There’s so much more to love in imperfection.

“They’re the same thing.” I try to memorize the image of Andrew standing by the mannequins, grinning at me, because neither of us will ever carry this moment in his wallet.

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When the hotel half an hour from Amarillo has no more rooms, and Andrew says he’s sorry to make our stay uncomfortable, but he booked only one room because he didn’t know I would agree to come at the last minute, I have to keep my voice at an even pitch. I have to keep my teeth from grinding because the man at the desk is already giving us a look that says he’s seen our type before and would just as soon we go somewhere else, but if I leave in a huff for another hotel, then I’m the dramatic ex who’s still not over the breakup. And I am, emphatically, getting over it.

As the man programs our room keys, Andrew slips his arm around my shoulders, and I allow it, because the only thing worse than being an obvious gay couple in public is being an obvious gay couple *fighting* in public. I want to believe this room situation wasn’t Andrew’s intention, that the contemplative man in the museum planned this trip out west, not the man sliding his hand to my lower back in the lobby of a three-star hotel. But then, it’s not one or the other. They’re the same person.

Once in the room, I fling my bag into the middle of the king-size bed and take my sleep clothes into the bathroom to change. After thirteen hours in the car, my body feels

tight in the joints and wobbly everywhere in between, like knotted lengths of rope. I had been in a sleepy haze for the last hundred miles, but my drowsiness cleared away as soon as we entered the hotel. A flash of self-loathing scalds me when I understand why: my simple, pathetic subconscious perceives a hotel room with Andrew, and my blood feels thicker, my thoughts run back-and-forth between imagined and remembered scenarios. My mother told me when I was a teenager, one of the few times she gave me plain advice, that whoever you screw is written in your brain forever, even after all the cells in your body have replaced themselves, and that person's presence will always be like the little thrill of lighting a match. *Isn't that romantic?* I asked her, and my mother dropped her sherry bottle into a metal garbage can and laughed as it shattered.

When I slip out of the bathroom, hands deep in the pockets of my sweatpants, Andrew holds out a glass filled with red wine. Checking the impulse to knock it from his hands, I fall onto the bed. It's not fair to blame him. I must be written in his brain, too.

"You won't have a drink with me?" Standing there with a glass of warm wine in each hand, entreating me with his eyes to drink, he looks more fit for giving communion than seduction.

"Forget it. Your 'someday' is never going to come."

"I've been drinking alone for a while now." He sits on the corner of the bed farthest from me. "It's fine if you don't feel like talking." We've talked all day, but now he wants something more.

The wine sits on my tongue like copper. Why did I take the glass? Emotional men like Andrew know how to turn vulnerability to their advantage, but it's not insincere. Suckers like me usually fall for it.

Andrew waits until he's poured us both a second glass. "I appreciate the chance for closure."

I almost tip the wine into my lap. "You're delusional if you think we drove a thousand miles for you to pity me." This sad figure, sitting hunched over on a crusty hotel comforter, a drop of burgundy blossoming on the sleeve of his white t-shirt, wants to believe I pine for him, that I look for his face among the shouting, impersonal figures in bars. The second glass goes down smoother.

"It's not pity. I wish I could be like you."

"You're sad, you know that? This trip is one sad mid-life crisis." I don't want to admit that my words apply just as much to me.

"I know." Andrew abandons his glass on the nightstand, crawls up next to me, and drinks from the bottle. He knows how much I hate emotional scenes, how I would stop them with my hands, my mouth, whatever I had to.

We drain the bottle and Andrew lets it roll onto the floor and draw an arc across the carpet. Andrew's fingers graze my face like moth's wings, and my laugh sounds unfamiliar. Everything else, I recall exactly from the many times before: the same catch in his breath, barely perceptible, the same shadows cast by his lowered lashes, the same elbow putting too much pressure on my thigh. When our teeth knock together, I let him sink into me. This is the only moment we've had today that feels anything like what we had last year.

As his hands slip under my shirt and scrape my ribs, I remember shattering glass. But when he drags his palms to my hips and says my name, I draw my knees up and shove him off me. The look of wide-eyed hurt on his face is one he never got to see on

me. He looks at the bulge in my sweatpants as though he can't understand why I would contradict my own body.

"If a bottle of wine was your whole plan to get me into bed, you should have bought better wine." I'm sure he knows I'll be gone in the morning.

On rare occasions we could spend all night together, we always had a hotel room, because Andrew wasn't comfortable in my apartment. Too intimate, maybe. In the morning, Andrew always tried to leave without waking me, slipping my arm from around his shoulders and carefully replacing the covers. Most of the time, I let him think I was asleep and watched him through the curtain of my eyelashes as he rooted around in the dark for his clothes and pressed his face close to the mirror. What sign, what mark did he think would show on his face?

Sometimes, I locked my arm around him when he tried to move it, held him there until his body tensed. "Don't go. I'll make you breakfast."

He didn't smile. His mind was already somewhere else, had already swept nervously through the lobby and left the compromising hotel behind him. When he knew I was awake, he always passed by the mirror without looking. I imagined that he checked his face in his car's visor mirror, pulling at the skin below his eyes to make sure nothing guilty hid there.

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A headache hammers me out of sleep, light pulsing behind my eyelids. Through my eyelids. Scratchy sheets and shouts of rowdy guests in the hall bring me back to the hotel room. In the cramped darkness, the TV is a window to somewhere painfully blue, with Andrew's silhouette hiding a piece of it. A silent image resolves, watery, on the

screen's surface: two figures in open-mouthed anguish. No, two faces of exaggerated ecstasy. Two tangled bodies. Sitting cross-legged on a pallet of blankets on the floor at the foot of the bed, Andrew's outline wavers, the shoulders rounded and the bent arm shaking.

Porn without sound is unnerving, like flames in the distance that could be a harmless bonfire or a building burning to its foundations. Whether the actors are screaming or singing or calling for someone doesn't matter. Maybe there isn't meant to be sound, just a hunched shadow filled with Andrew's short breaths.

If pretending to sleep when Andrew left was a mercy, watching him now is a kind of honesty. Closing my eyes wouldn't give Andrew his privacy; it would only be a pretense to assuage my guilt.

Andrew strokes himself with steady, mechanical motions, never taking his gaze off the screen. Does he really get anything from the man and woman's silent thrashing, or is the porn only for the numbing effect, a blunt tool to ease an unpleasant task? Does he find it easier to watch straight porn, the necessary sexual counterpart of the life he imitated from TV?

Despite all the time I spent thinking of Andrew's family, of the strange power they had over me, though we'd never met, I never wondered whether Andrew was attracted to his wife, or loved her. The vocabulary for such a question didn't exist in the narrow boundaries we'd set. When Andrew made me the off-screen villain in his domestic drama, it was less painful for me to assume I was an excuse for the break, not the reason.

Andrew finishes with a hissing exhale. His silhouette collapses as he tips his head back and slumps against the bed. He fixes his pants, and I'm grateful that when he wakes up alone in a hotel room, at least he won't be naked as after a one-night stand. I hope that in a few hours he'll lie down next to the impression of my body and pretend we had a few drinks and tumbled into bed like we used to, and I had just slipped out of bed to get ready for the Saturday dinner shift. He can think of it as a view from above, like the perfect, artificial Los Alamos, a moment frozen in last spring.

He switches off the TV and twists around, staring through the darkness. I don't know whether he can make out my own staring eyes, but we watch each other across the distance until the strain makes my temples throb.

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The taxi ride to the bus station is only ten minutes. By bus, the highway to Arizona spools out for nearly twenty hours. I count the wine-colored stains flecked with fur, the slow-moving things flattened and left to cook as travelers speed westward. Cast-offs populate the highway, too—bits of cars, mostly, casualties of the journey, but sometimes more personal things: a wooden dresser, missing a drawer, and a full-length mirror, somehow uncracked; several grocery sacks stuffed with women's shoes; a plastic dollhouse, repainted in dust. A small stack of canned goods sits next to a mile marker, but I can't make out the labels.

If I left something of my own here, rested it in the dirt along this sun-dried stretch between the Grand Canyon and a depressing hotel room near Amarillo, maybe Andrew would see it. If he came this way at all. If I had anything to offer, any token that Andrew would recognize in the moment it slides by the window. I could text him, tell him to look

out for the dog kennel or the bed frame or the neat pyramid of cans, but I don't. I'm traveling light now.

## RAISE, CALL

By the time Catharine decided to have her pacemaker shut off, her husband had been dead ten years, and she had felt dead at least as long. Longer. Catharine called the generator nestled below her collarbone a “pacemaker” for convenience’s sake—*did she look like the kind of woman who had time to explain “implantable cardioverter-defibrillator”?*—but its task was to slow down her heart, not speed it up. All her life, Catharine’s heart had been trying to outrun her.

When she returned home from the doctor’s office, the side gate had blown open and turned the spigot on. Ignoring her neighbor, who pointed at the running water from where he sat smoking on his front porch with his legs propped up on a stack of phone books, Catharine let the faucet run. The yard would be grateful for some water, even if it did collect in marshy pools where the soil had washed away years ago. Catharine slammed her shoulder against the door to force the sticking lock and left the door open to the harsh autumn breeze. She dropped her purse on the floor, slinging prescription bottles across the kitchen tile like dice.

In the light struggling through layers of dust on the handmade scalloped curtains, the gray tone of her arms surprised her. Catharine’s reflection in the microwave betrayed no change: tombstone-square jaw, wide-bridged nose, close-cut hair now the color of charcoal, long spent. Most people mistook her for a man at first, and she liked that impression, enjoyed the deference that turned to confusion. Now that she had no social



circle to impress and no husband to appease, Catharine could be as unfeminine as she'd always wanted to.

With Don lying fleshless in his grave, no doubt in a place far different from the exclusive heaven he had envisioned, and two of her three children estranged, Catharine had only one person to share her decision with. She rehearsed twice before leaving a voicemail for Miranda, the shortest she had ever recorded: "It's 3:45 p.m. I've just been to the doctor's. Had the damned machine turned off. Too much damage to rip it out, they said. Let me know what the next few weeks look like. I'm sure you have opinions."

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Before noon the next day, Miranda charged through the kitchen door with one arm in her coat and the other brushing a cloud of frizzy dark hair from her face. "What's the drama this time, Mother?"

The coffee trickling into Catharine's mug punctuated the silence. At thirty-three, Miranda was the youngest of Catharine's brood, but she acted like she was the only one with her life figured out. And Catharine knew she loved stripping attention away from her mother. In the private scenes they enacted, Miranda always tried to snatch the spotlight. The teaspoon scraped the mug as Catharine swirled in a scoop of sugar. Then another. What was the use now of watching one's diet?

With a flick of her wrist to decline coffee, Miranda tossed her coat onto a chair and swung the chair around to sit astride it. "Why so quiet? You must be dying to talk about it, or you wouldn't have called."

Overly pointed, but accurate. Catharine always let Miranda shoulder the effort to maintain their relationship. Catharine's indifference toward her children had already

made strangers of the two boys, but Miranda continued to hang on, ostensibly out of grim duty and clinical curiosity. Or perhaps she really cared for Catharine. Who could be sure what went on in that flighty, belligerent brain? Whatever her personal crosses, Miranda was willing to drop her work making personalized woven goods for Etsy to drive the hour south from Washington at a message's notice.

Catharine's coffee was too sweet, and the undissolved grains of sugar crunched between her teeth. Maybe she should get used to creamer. How many flavors would she have time to try? "You're sure no coffee? Tea? Anything to eat?" This was the back-and-forth: Catharine rattled off amenities she did not have, and Miranda sighed her answer. The cupboards held only the saltine crackers and olives that Catharine subsisted on, and she knew Miranda abhorred to take anything from her mother.

Miranda leaned across the table and placed her hand over the rim of Catherine's cup, stopping her from hiding her face with another sip. "You have my attention. What's this talk about your ICD?"

"Got tired of the shocks. I prefer to live naturally." The electrical pulses, when they ice-picked through her chest, seemed to draw out her life by a string and dangle her fate at the end of it. But she was used to those molasses moments, when her heart was made to settle, and she could not imagine anything more natural. By "live naturally," she meant that she would no longer live warm-cold, half-in, half-out, but entirely separate and discrete, as nothing to no one. Her heart would owe no debt to anything, machine or otherwise. She would be free from stifling obligation, for the first time since she was a teenager.

If Miranda could have understood, she would have let contact lapse ages ago, like her brothers and father. Stubborn, always too stubborn to admit a bad bet.

“So it’s no big deal?”

“No deal at all.” The conversation wasn’t as exciting as Catharine had hoped.

“Perfect.” Miranda tipped her chair forward onto two legs and dropped clasped hands onto the table. “Because I came with my own announcement.”

Catharine rested her mug so softly that the earthenware on laminate made no sound, allowing the click of her tongue to break the pause.

“I’m dating again. Two men, actually. One is twenty-eight and one is nineteen.” Her foot tapped an agitated rhythm. “I’m leaving Randal to be with them, but I haven’t told him yet. Maybe I won’t tell him. He’s nasty when he gets jealous.”

“You always pick immature men.”

The chair legs thunked back to earth. “And?”

Catharine lifted her eyebrows and took a noisy sip.

“No guilt trip? No forced tears? No bemoaning the wasted years of motherhood?”

“I never liked Randal. Too soft. No drive.”

With a clattering of cupboard doors, Catharine fetched a new box of saltines and delicately peeled open the cellophane sleeve. “But you already knew that.”

Salt grazed Catharine’s fingertips as Miranda snatched the cracker she was lifting to her mouth. Crumbs rained from Miranda’s hand.

“Why so testy? You’re the one leaving him.”

“I’m not leaving him, Mom. There are no boyfriends. I said that to surprise you.”

“And get my heart rate up, now that there’s nothing to regulate it?” She dabbed up crumbs with a damp finger and licked them off.

“There really is something different about you.” Righting her chair in a gesture of penitence, Miranda explained that she hadn’t believed the news about the ICD, had thought it was another petty bid for attention, like the erotic book club, or the trained pigs, or the gambling addiction.

“You’re callous, lacking in sympathy. You should understand. There was nothing keeping me tied to this life but this tangle of wires. And now there’s nothing.”

“Not even me?”

“Oh, Miri.” From Catharine’s mouth, the long unused nickname made Miranda flinch. “You put up with me. You didn’t let me get rid of you, and I can’t help but love you for that. But I never wanted any of this. A housewife and mother of three?” Catharine’s hoarse laugh echoed in the tiny kitchen, as grating as its sudden stop. “My body is trying to kill itself.”

Catharine didn’t get up to shut the door Miranda had left unlatched, letting it rattle like a roulette wheel as the wind hurried inland from the bay.

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All that month, her heart trod on. Her pulse seemed so calm and steady that Catharine thought she could feel the languid space between beats. The arrhythmia that had marked her from childhood, trying to open her ribcage like popcorn bursting from a kernel, failed to speed her heart beyond its limits. Living without her implant’s regulatory shocks was not, the doctors had explained, a death sentence. But Catharine had been sure

that once she left herself vulnerable, her number would come up. She examined her mortality like all her problems: by the odds. Hers, she reckoned, were short.

The few times Miranda called during those few weeks, Catharine answered and hung up, to let her know that the game went on, but that words had run out. The tethers were off, if they had existed at all. She saw no purpose in tending to the vestiges of life that clung to her.

On Wednesday morning, as freezing rain peppered the windows and varnished the pavement, Catharine hoisted herself out of bed before her alarm chimed. She dressed in her gardening clothes, rotten-sweet scented after years in the back of the closet with dryer sheets pressed between. The gray shorts hung below her scab-dry knees, and the navy blue tank top settled on her protruding collarbone and lay almost flat over her small, downturned breasts. The bright blue cap named the high school where Don had taught, and she tossed it back into the closet and smoothed the cowlick on her crown. She had donated all of Don's clothes when he passed, the tweed jackets and stiff shirts that he believed made him a teacher, but she hadn't thought to throw out the hat. Why should she? Don didn't own the high school, no matter how much he insisted that he'd given more of his metaphorical blood to it than anyone else.

"You can't understand," he'd say to Catharine, placing his fork down with too much force, half a bite of steak still on the end, "what it's like to look into a kid's eyes and know he's going to be a failure." If it was a Friday, the night he took wine with dinner, he might look around the table at their children, shrug, and add, "Hell, maybe you do." When Catharine finally grabbed the hat again, she jammed it onto her head like she was quashing the memory.

The gym five miles down the highway, not the closest to Catharine's house but arguably the cleanest, shared a plot with the Nile Prize Casino. In the eighties, when the casino was named Cairo of Coos Bay, it had stood alone on new blacktop. Back then, the only people who bothered to drive that far north of town parked under the giant plaster face of a frowning pharaoh, and fingered clips of cash shoved deep in their pockets. The garish-gold, weather-worn face Catharine had wished on so many times, had come to mark her days by, was replaced by cold, neon lights.

Only the gym drew a crowd in the storm. Outside, members wearing sweatpants and armbands for their phones sprinted through the rain to the tinted glass doors. Catharine fought to keep hold of her umbrella. She dropped it in a crumpled pile inside the door, a battered, waterlogged bird. A trainer behind the check-in and smoothie counter, a stick-armed woman with a shiny, black plait, stopped Catharine as she passed. "Sir, you have to scan your card."

"Forgot it at home." The pitch of Catharine's voice, deeper than when she was young, but still plainly feminine, made the woman's blue-lined eyes widen. Her embarrassment was delicious. The trainer apologized and waved her on; Catharine had already grabbed a towel from the counter.

In the rows of treadmills along the far wall of the first floor, only one machine was empty. Catharine slung her towel over the machine in the back row and climbed up between a girl in a cross-country t-shirt and a middle-aged man watching cartoons on the built-in TV. They kept their eyes pointed forward, as though too polite to notice her. Catharine adjusted the controls to a comfortable walk, adding her steps to the man's thumping footfalls and the girl's rhythmic breathing.

The treadmill produced the lulling effect of movement without direction. Wasn't that the point? Did these people, lined up like horses at starting gates, feel more comfortable staying in one place? She increased the speed. The cartoon characters on the man's program were laughing hysterically, rolling back and forth across the screen through pools of their own tears, but the man's face was settled in a mild frown, resting comfortably in decades of wrinkles around his mouth.

Catharine picked up her pace, and the machine's whine grew more shrill. Her bones crunched against each other with every step. Early in her marriage, before the string of feverish "passion projects" that consumed the hours while Don and the children were at school, those obsessions and strange hobbies her family came to think of as bids for attention, Catharine ran. Not on treadmills or park trails, but along highways and creek beds, through construction sites and warehouse districts. She counted every pothole or shredded tire she leapt over, every piece of detritus she could leave in the dust. Every time Don was too harsh with the children, every time he cancelled their weekly night out together because Catharine "didn't deserve it after that childish outburst," was an obstacle she could leave on the roadside. She didn't have to think if she didn't stop.

As the years and the obstacles fell on her, Catharine had slowed, and she did stop. By the time the kids had all moved out, she rarely exercised, and after Don had retired, she left the house only for necessities. Now, the pain bouncing back and forth between her hips and ankles reassured her that her body was vulnerable, that she could use the long years of stagnation as a weapon against herself. She jabbed the button until the track flew beneath her.

Her heart thumped against her aching ribs. Catharine clenched her eyes shut and waited for the shock, then remembered that the saving current wouldn't come. She gripped the metal handles, the tendons in her hands shaking like electrified wires beneath her skin, and her heart rate flashed on the screen: 120. The cross-country runner glanced over as Catharine's breath rattled. Catharine willed the girl to take her eyes away, to just mind her own business until the damage was done.

The worn soles of Catharine's gardening sneakers slapped the treadmill in vigorous applause, the smart snaps of cards flipping over. When the clapping stopped, Catharine flew. Her knee crumpled, weaker than her stubborn heart. She turned toward the ceiling, arced backward into the wall. Overhead, the giant fan spun dizzily, multiplying and collapsing like rings of stars in the man's cartoon. Catharine had not attached her treadmill's emergency stop cord, and the belt whirred on.

Catharine swung her arms out to force back the gawkers and attempted to stand. Her bastard legs refused to move. The scene was so pathetic, she wanted to cry. She had gotten up early that morning with the intention of having a spectacular heart attack and expiring in the middle of a crowded gym, but instead had tumbled off the equipment and had to endure this gaggle of well-meaning stares. Was life this unfair to anyone else?

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It only got more unfair. Catharine refused to let gym staff call an ambulance, but the cartoon-watching man, convinced she had a concussion, insisted on driving her home. He pestered her into relinquishing Miranda's number, so she climbed into bed with a true crime novel, bunched the covers around herself, and waited for her daughter's dramatic response. Before the siren had even rung the lunch hour, Miranda fluttered through the



kitchen door with an overnight bag slung over her shoulder and a sloshing plastic container of soup in the crook of her arm.

The soup was too salty, even for a woman who liked to really taste the salt in her white beans and ham, but Catharine ate it anyway. Her pounding head wouldn't be helped by a lecture from Miranda about how a person couldn't live on crackers and olives.

Miranda sat at the end of the bed and pulled her square-foot loom and several plastic baggies of yarn out of her canvas bag. Catharine's eyes skittered up and down the loom with Miranda's fingers, the motion smoothing her nerves like waves wearing down a beach. The scene called up another, a memory of her mother sitting by the stove to knit, but Catharine shook her head to dispel it. "You come here to make potholders?"

"It's going to be a tablet case." She didn't look up from her work. "And I came over because you had an episode this morning."

Catharine smoothed the covers and pretended not to hear. "Want to play poker?"

"You're not allowed, and I don't know how."

"That's my failure as a mother. Fetch the deck from the drawer under the stove."

The Bicycle cards, worn soft on the edges, spilled from the torn box. "Just so we're clear, there won't be any stakes."

"Playing against you could hardly be considered gambling." Catharine fanned the deck out across her lap and picked out cards to demonstrate flushes, straights, and full houses. "There are two sides to the game: playing the odds and playing your opponents."

"I'm no good at math."

“Then you’d better be good at reading people. For once, don’t make yourself the center of attention. Try to see more than you show.”

As Catharine explained five-card draw, Miranda touched each face-down card in turn. “Dad would really lose it if he could see this.”

“Your father hated gambling because he couldn’t understand it. He only made decisions he was sure of.” As her fingernails scraped the textured cards, a chill jumped up Catharine’s arm. “Not to say he was never wrong. You paying attention?”

Talking about her husband was a greater sacrilege than the card-playing. Even before she tied herself to him, Catharine had known Don as a man of quiet anger, who grew more enraged at whispered truths than at spoken lies. He didn’t need to shout because his words were precise enough, his tone exact enough to quell opposition. Miranda had been the only one of their children to return to Oregon for his funeral, and once she and Catharine stood alone in the empty parlor, surrounded by flowers that hung their heads, neither said anything.

In their practice game, it was Miranda’s turn to bet, but she pinched her cards into a curled fan and stared beyond them. “He was an asshole. I don’t miss him.” Her eyes jumped to Catharine’s, and hung there. When Catharine finally smiled, Miranda collapsed back on the bed, laughing and shielding her face with her cards. “I’ve wanted to say that for a long time.”

“Say whatever you need to. I may not be a good listener, but I’m not easily offended.”

“Then you should know that this stunt with your ICD is stupid. You’re too tough for bullshit like this.”

Catharine studied the wrinkles on her hands and pressed the veins that protruded, making breaks in the lightning-blue currents. When she used to hoard every quarter she could hide from Don to take to barroom games, skipping meals to fund just one more hand, her counselors tried to convince her that there was no shame in leaving the table. And now, Miranda insisted it was weakness to stop taking the odds.

“Did I offend you already?”

“Just thinking about cards.”

Miranda mixed the deck by swirling the cards around in a pile. “If I win, you get your ICD reactivated. If you win, I’ll stop hassling you about it.”

“So I have to play for a little peace?” The cards fluttered between her hands as she shuffled, snapping like puzzle pieces fitting into place.

“It’s not gambling. There’s no money involved.”

“The stakes are just my life.” The volume of her own laugh startled her. “How I’ve always preferred to play.”

“You’re right, this is a bad idea.”

“Too late. We’re anted up.”

With a few hints from Catharine, Miranda came up with two pair at the end of the last round. Catharine spread her full house across her lap, kissed her fingertips, and tapped the top of her head. Muscle memory.

“You can’t call that fair.” Miranda swept the cards back into a pile. “Want to play for saltines?”

Her heart had beat fast when Miranda first brought out the cards, but now it was quiet. “I like you, Miri.”

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Sixty-three dollars in crumpled ones and fives, dug from the bottom of the kitchen utensils drawer, extracted from the gap between washer and dryer, excavated from half a dozen hidey-holes from the old days, scattered around the house where Don wouldn't find them. It was the last of Catharine's scratch-the-itch money, and the last she would spend at a poker table, she assured Miranda.

"Sixty-three now, another hundred after you go to the bank." Miranda let the car idle in Catharine's driveway, her hands resting on the wheel. She had seemed so excited when Catharine asked her on an afternoon out, had probably thought they would go antique shopping or to an uplifting movie. "There's no one to keep an eye on you anymore."

"No one ever did." In the afternoons when Catharine ran out to the Cairo before school let out, no one knew she was a fugitive. The conditioned flounce of her hair when she laughed and the soft sheen of her nails when she pushed her chips into the pot spoke of a woman in control of her own money, with no husband or offspring to come home and wonder why there was no scent of baking cheese or cream of chicken soup from the oven. She projected the image of the woman she wanted to be, a risk-taker with a short attention span and unbounded opportunity.

"Apparently I need to."

Since yesterday, when their eyes met over the tops of playing cards, Catharine wanted to show Miranda what her world had been, back when the people closest to her assumed she didn't have one outside the fence that enclosed their yard. "Don't you want to try something your father never would have allowed?"

Miranda chewed a lock of hair as she considered, but already she was shifting the car into drive.

The sun had just dropped behind the buildings when they parked in front of the Nile Prize Casino. In the dimming day, the casino was a glittering signal flare in a desert of parking lot. When the flashing lights imprinted on her retinas, Catharine blinked the patterns away.

The interior, though brighter and louder than Catharine remembered, boasted all the old embellishments, or refurbished versions of them. A fake river wound through the center of the main floor. Beneath the dyed-aquamarine current, a layer of glued-down tokens shone. At the river's end, past the line of chiming slot machines, a ten-foot king cobra spiraled around a monstrous plexiglass diamond. The cobra's black sequin scales reflected lights of all colors, like an oil slick.

"It looks like a B movie threw up in here," Miranda said, but Catharine had to tug her sleeve to lead her away from the blue and gold patterned tapestries.

When Catharine returned from the exchange counter with her chips, she dropped a third of the stack into Miranda's cupped hands. The remainder wasn't much, but the stack was taller than what she used to work with. A few good rounds should double it. "Don't lose it all at one table," she told Miranda.

"You don't want me to watch you at the poker table?"

"If you weren't going to put up, why come along?" Rusty as she was, the first hand or two might be rough. Better that Miranda not watch until Catharine found her rhythm. "Try low-bet blackjack. Roulette, if you want. Come find me when you've gone bust."

“You make it sound so exciting.”

Catharine didn't wait long to join a low-limit game of Texas Hold'em. The clacking of chips together pricked her ears, and the static brush of felt jolted her fingers like a cardiac device kicking to life.

The big blind came to Catharine on her first hand, and the pair of chips was warm when she placed it in the pot. The memory of gripping them in her fist while she hovered near the table brought a pulse of shame. Despite the certainty she'd felt while gathering the stashed money, the reality of placing a bet for the first time in nearly thirty years made her doubt. But this had always been the destination, since Miranda drew the cards from their hidden place in the drawer, since the battery pack in Catharine's chest became a dead weight. Why feel guilty for following the likeliest pattern?

Catharine raised twice on two pair, and everyone else folded before the fourth round. The other players seemed confused by the old woman (man?) with the short stack and aggressive bets. The early victory led her straight into a mistake that cost her the next hand, and she spent two hands after that observing her opponents. The old Catharine would have exploited their timid bets and swept the whole table, she was sure. How could she do otherwise? It was hardly even gambling.

Between hands, Miranda tapped Catharine on the shoulder. “This shit is harder than it looks.”

Catharine peeked at the cards she'd just been dealt. “Don't patronize me. I'm getting my momentum.”

“I meant blackjack.”

“Too bad. At least this poker lesson's free.”

Getting used to an audience was tougher than Catharine expected. Miranda had already seen her play at home, and probably couldn't follow a live game anyway. But when Catharine should have been calculating her opponents' hands, her thoughts kept skipping to her daughter. Only Miranda had stayed tethered to her, no matter the mistakes Catharine made, and this time Catharine was determined not to show her a failure.

She played her best to break even, but bad cards on the flop several times in a row gutted Catharine's stash of chips. Then, all in on a full house. She shoved her stack toward the middle, making no outward sign of her satisfaction with Miranda's surprised stare. That thrilling validation was the only difference between 1985 and now, the crisp feeling of freedom of having no one to rush home to or make up lies for, just the perfect isolated moment of coming up against the odds and *winning*. The man across from her, wearing a t-shirt from the Enchanted Forest theme park, where he had apparently visited from somewhere even less interesting, laughed as he turned over his cards. He couldn't believe it. Four of kind.

When the dealer pulled the last of Catharine's chips away, she fought the impulse to snatch them back. The stack hadn't amounted to much, but the prospect of leaving the table after so few rounds, of letting her daughter drive her home with nothing, made sweat bead on her upper lip. "I didn't—I need those chips."

The dealer, already burning a card for the next hand, barely looked at her.

"You have to let me keep playing."

"Mom?" The upward lilt in Miranda's voice, so rare for Catharine's headstrong girl, was almost as jarring as the loss, but Catharine didn't respond.

The cards went around the table to all except Catharine, and the dealer instructed her to purchase more chips at the counter.

“I’m old. I didn’t mean to bet on the last hand. You have to understand, I just got confused.” Whatever dignity she had to sacrifice to get back into the game would be worth it. When the chips were cashed, Miranda would remember the victory, not the humiliating scene in the middle. “I’m sorry for the mistake. My memory—” Her muscles were knotted, her shoulders shaking. The other gamblers averted their eyes. Miranda pressed close, hands hovering above Catharine.

When the attack Catharine had been waiting for finally came, the familiar knocking in her ribs doubled her over, and she waited for the answering shock that didn’t come. When would she learn? She pounded her chest where the dead weight sat, cursed her stupidity and herself because she couldn’t stop thinking about the damned chips. Is this what she wanted? Is this what she spoke into being, when she told the doctor she would take her chances?

Voices swelled around her, but Catharine couldn’t make sense of them. Forehead pressed to the felt. Arms shielding her face. One breath in, one out. Just like sprawling face-down on the kickball diamond at ten years old, begging her pulse to please be quiet. Catharine whispered the same wish now, whatever quiet would mean. And it came. Not all at once, but one beat at a time, the desperate fist in her chest loosed its grip. She flung her arm out to find Miranda and grasped her wrist.

“Crowding her isn’t helping,” Miranda said, waving away the players who had gathered around Catharine. “No ambulance yet. Just give her a minute.”



Bless the girl. If only Catharine could fix the situation, show Miranda what she had come to do. “I can win it back. Just another hand or two. I’ll turn twenty dollars into a hundred.”

The Enchanted Forest man, still seated, pounded his fist on the table. “What the hell? This is some kind of scam.” He pointed a pink finger at Miranda. “You’ve been watching the whole time. You find out our hands, then the old one fakes a heart attack so you can give her the info, or extra cards.”

The dealer moved to placate the man, but Catharine was already pulling herself to her feet. “If I was a cheater, I wouldn’t waste my time on low-stakes dummies like you. I’d fleece some real poker players.”

“Then why’d you lose?”

Hating every pinprick of uneven stubble on his babyish face, Catharine pointed back at him and prepared to draw the words from her roiling stomach, but Miranda gripped her shoulder.

“Don’t be the center of attention,” Miranda said. “It’s bad strategy.” She let Catharine lead the way outside.

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In the gaudy neon atmosphere of night, Catharine felt too visible. She had shown her daughter too much.

Miranda clicked the button on her car key, and the car’s headlights flashed across the lot, but she stayed rooted beneath the casino’s facade, where the pharaoh’s head should have been. “You’re not embarrassed, are you? Who cares?”

“That I almost attacked a man twice my size in a casino?”

“Not a great choice. But you’re living naturally, right? Living how you want.”

Catharine rooted through her purse, but since she was looking for nothing, found nothing. The open space between them produced a kind of pressure, compelling her to speak. “I think I spent so long not getting what I wanted that now I don’t know what I want.” She hadn’t meant to say it. In Don’s household of mathematical certainty, there was no expression to encompass vagaries, no variable for feeling. The rule itself was unwritten.

“Having second thoughts?”

“Having first thoughts I should have had a long time ago.”

“I know what you mean.” Miranda tied up her mess of curls with a rubber band from around her wrist. When the casino lights lit her high cheekbones and sloping nose in washes of blue, yellow, pink, Catharine envisioned Miranda through the future phases of her life. Miranda as an old woman, an intimidating woman. Not special to anyone else, perhaps, not extraordinary.

Miranda strode toward her car. Her shadow stretched tall in front of her, knowing nothing, but confident and defined.

When Catharine’s life was nearly devoid of choice, restricted to defined paths by Don and the church and her social circles, she didn’t choose Miri. But she could choose her now. That possibility, as it expanded into all the bets Catharine had left to make, jolted through her, like the moment all the cards are shown.

“Watch this,” Miranda said, twisting the key in the ignition. With the screech of rubber scraping a trail across blacktop, she sped the car out of the lot. Her shrieking

laughter rang in Catharine's ears like a rush of tokens spilling from a slot machine. No—  
sweeter than that.

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